

**Performing the Passion of Christ in Postmodernity:**  
**American Passion/passion Plays as Ritual and Postmodern Theatre**

By

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## Abstract

The dissertation investigates American theatrical performances based on the Passion of Christ as related in the Four Gospels of the New Testament. I compare three Midwestern Passion plays, *The New Great Passion Play* (Eureka Springs, AR), *The Promise* (Glen Rose, TX) and *The Man Who Ran* (Disney, OK) to four notable adaptations of the Passion narrative written by contemporary mainstream American playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000* (1994), Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (1997), Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play: A Cycle* (2004) and Stephen Adly Guirgis' *Our Lady of 120th Street* (2004) in order to examine their theatrical and ritualistic aspects, as well as their social, cultural and political functions and problems. For analytical purposes, I distinguish the two groups by calling the former, which are performed in the mode of belief, "Passion plays" and the latter, which are performed in the mode of critique, "passion plays." As the major theoretical framework, I adopt the theories of ritual studies represented by anthropologists Victor Turner, David Kertzer, Clifford Geertz and Catherine Bell, and the discourse of postmodernism as defined by French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These interdisciplinary case studies on American Passion/passion plays as both ritual and theatre demonstrate the viability, rather than the demise, of the metanarrative of the Passion, which is transformed into small narratives in postmodernity. Additionally, the case studies highlight the multifaceted nature of performance, which attests to the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to performances in general. The comparative analysis between the Passion plays and the passion plays is also intended as a showcase of difficult dialogues between the conservative and the liberal.

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## **Preface: Note on *Passion/passion***

The dissertation project revolves around American theatrical performances that are generally called “Passion plays.” Although it is not a newly-coined term, its usage in this study needs some clarification. The word “passion” originally derives from the Ancient Greek verb πάσχω (paskho) meaning “to suffer” and was used by Gospel writers to refer to the physical, mental and spiritual suffering of Jesus of Nazareth during the last week of his public ministry (what is often called Passion Week) culminating with the crucifixion. In Christian language, the word is usually capitalized and followed by the specific reference to Jesus as “Christ,” meaning “Messiah” (“anointed one”), as in “the Passion of Christ” to distinguish the singular historic event from other sufferings in the common sense. Thus, a Passion play, by the narrowest definition, is a dramatic representation of the suffering of Jesus including: his solitary prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane; betrayal by one of his Apostles, Judas Iscariot; trial before the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate; scourging; and crucifixion. In a broader definition, a Passion play can be a performance of selected narratives from the Bible including the Old and New Testaments with a focus on the life of Jesus as the Christ, as in the medieval Vienna Passion play, the Celtic Passion cycles of Cornwall and Brittany and the St. Gall Passion play. In this case, the play may cover not only the whole life of Jesus as recorded in the Four Gospels (including his virgin birth, childhood, public ministry followed by the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension), but also the fall of Adam and Eve and the stories of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, the prophets and so on. Extant American Passion plays are scattered between these two extremes in terms of their scope, though most of them focusing on the events that happened during the Passion Week.



Regardless of their scope, however, the American Passion plays that are the focus of this dissertation have three common denominators. First, their central focus lies on the suffering of Jesus imbued with the Christian subtext of Atonement and Redemption. Secondly, each of them includes the Resurrection and the Ascension even though they, strictly speaking, are not about the “suffering” of Jesus, probably because the two events constitute an indispensable part of the foundational beliefs of Christianity. Thirdly, each is performed primarily for evangelical purposes as a religious and artistic endeavor to make the gospel message more accessible to the public and provide spiritual inspiration. Based on these observations, a Passion play (with a capital P) can be defined as a selective theatrical representation of the Bible performed in the mode of belief with the suffering of Jesus as the central event and including his resurrection and ascension to heaven.

There is another type of play dealt with in the dissertation, and it is distinguished from the first category by being called “passion plays” (with a small p). Although passion plays share the same motif with the Passion plays (i.e. the Passion of Christ), they do not feature Jesus as the central character and can be thought of as adaptations rather than faithful renditions of the sacred event, dramatizing the “suffering” of contemporary individuals in relation to or in analogy with the Passion. In contrast to the Passion plays that are produced to spread the Gospel and proselytize, the passion plays criticize some of the institutional aspects of Christianity and concern themselves with socio-political rather than spiritual issues. It is probably for this reason that none of the latter plays include the final sequence of the Passion essential to Christian belief: resurrection and ascension. In this light, a passion play can be defined as a theatrical representation of narratives adapted from the Passion and performed in the mode of critique with

a focus on the plight of modern individuals. This distinction between the Passion and the passion will be maintained throughout the study and will be made clearer as we look at specific examples in each chapter.

## Introduction

The dissertation investigates American theatrical performances based on the Passion of Christ as related in the Four Gospels of the New Testament, one of the “grand narratives” of the western civilization. I compare three Midwestern Passion plays, *The New Great Passion Play* (Eureka Springs, AR), *The Promise* (Glen Rose, TX) and *The Man Who Ran* (Disney, OK) to four notable adaptations of the Passion narrative written by contemporary mainstream American playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy’s *Motherhood 2000* (1994), Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* (1997), Sarah Ruhl’s *Passion Play: A Cycle* (2004) and Stephen Adly Guirgis’ *Our Lady of 120th Street* (2004) in order to examine their theatrical and ritualistic aspects, as well as their social, cultural and political functions and problems. These case studies on American Passion/passion plays as both ritual and theatre demonstrate the viability, rather than the demise, of the metanarrative of the Passion, which is transformed into small narratives in postmodernity. Additionally, the case studies highlight the multifaceted nature of performance which attests to the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to performances in general.

As the major theoretical framework, I adopt the theories of ritual studies represented by anthropologists Victor Turner, David I. Kertzer, Clifford Geertz and Catherine Bell, and the discourse of postmodernism as defined by French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The ritual theories are field-specific tools particularly useful in shedding light on the power and the political dimensions of Passion plays when understood as rituals, while the postmodern theories allow situating them in the broader socio-political context and go farther to provide alternate models to the traditional ritual that the ritual theories criticize.

Although the theories come from two different fields and seem to diverge in the way that the religious and the secular do today, both the ritual theories and those of postmodernism share similar agendas and interests: structure, power and authority. It is through these common denominators that the interdisciplinary link between the two fields will be made and the theories will be used in conjunction throughout the project. Overall, the theories will not only help articulate my analysis of the performances but also explain why Passion/passion plays, both as an evangelical tool and as a critique, matter and appeal to a wide audience.

While many books and articles have been written on *The Oberammergau Passion Play* in Germany, little attention has been paid to American Passion plays and what it means to mount Passion plays in an American context, especially in the contemporary society. Two of the few recent scholarly reviews of American Passion plays, Charlene Faye Monk's doctoral dissertation *Passion Plays in the United States: The Contemporary Outdoor Tradition* (1998) and Dorothy Chansky's article "North American Passion Plays: 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' in the New Millennium" (2006) document several contemporary American Passion plays and discuss their artistic and political issues. Yet the two analyses are limited by their mono-disciplinary approach, lacking developed terms with which to go beyond the apparent theatrical aspects of the performance phenomena to articulate in what ways they are more than a play, how they provide the audience with powerful live performance experiences in spite of their artistic shortcomings and why they matter. The limitations of such studies prompt an interdisciplinary approach for a more comprehensive understanding of the particular type of performances, and incorporating ritual theories into the analysis proves fruitful in that regard.

Claire Sponsler's *Ritual Imports: Performing Medieval Drama in America* (2004) examines how two American Passion plays, Salmi Morse's *The Passion* (1879) and Josef Meier's *The Black Hills Passion Play* (1939-98) tried to evoke their connection to the exotic medieval past as "ritual imports" to find acceptance among the modern American public in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Sponsler, the plays can be seen as rituals since they are seasonal, "repeated on a regular, usually annual, basis," tied to the "belief systems and deepest values of their communities," "passed on from performer to performer through practices" rather than "documents," characterized by a higher degree of social interaction than that of the professional theatre and so on (8). Her book seems to be a pioneering work in regarding the Passion plays as rituals and these general observations may serve as a useful basis for an interdisciplinary understanding of the plays. However, she deals with plays that are no longer performed (therefore not contemporary), and she does not apply specific terms of theatre and ritual to the performances themselves in order to discuss their socio-cultural significance, which is what the present study sets out to do.

Before considering many ways in which American Passion plays can be considered "rituals" in addition to those suggested by Sponsler, I find it necessary to define the term. In *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997), Catherine Bell revisits and compares different understandings of ritual upheld by major theorists and summarizes her findings by stating that "[f]or the most part, ritual is the medium chosen to invoke those ordered relationships that are thought to obtain between human beings in the here-and-now and non-immediate sources of power, authority, and value" (xi). Although this is not the definition Bell abides by—since she is skeptical about any universalizing concept of ritual—it points out one of the most important

characteristics of ritual: the acknowledgment of the higher being or something larger than life as the source of authority. Even though this religious component of ritual has been contested by many contemporary anthropologists as limiting, most ritual performances, whether religious or secular by nature, seem to rely on the presence of something other than what is visibly present. This is evident in the American context where weddings, funerals, Thanksgiving dinners, presidential inauguration ceremonies and so on are performed citing some source of authority, not to speak of the obvious cases of religious rituals such as the Catholic Mass and upanayana, the Hindu ritual of initiation. The question is simply what the authority is, not so much whether there is any authority under whose name the ritual takes effect, since a ritual performance would be meaningless without it. Therefore, one might say that ritual is a performance event which has certain power due to the presence of Authority and/or people's belief in it. However, since there is no consensus over the nature of the Authority and it is not something empirically observable, any practical definition of ritual, for application and analysis purposes, will have to limit its scope to the visible, that is, the participants of the ritual and its socio-political functions. Accordingly, we will be looking at the particular type of ritual called Passion/passion plays primarily as communication between people, even though belief in the presence of God is its crucial ritual factor, and the discourses on ritual cited below are most useful for that purpose. Since one of the main goals of the project is to demonstrate the value of an interdisciplinary approach to performance, I borrow existing ideas of the leading ritual theorists and apply them to Passion plays when it is effective to do so, relying on their authority rather than challenging their ideas and trying to invent a new understanding of ritual.

The most readily applicable and politically neutral definition of ritual comes from the theatre/performance studies scholar Richard Schechner. In *Performance Theory*, he notes that whether a performance is ritual or theatre “depends mostly on context and function,” suggesting that if the performance’s purpose is efficacy—“to effect transformations,” we can regard it as a ritual, while if the purpose is entertainment, it is theatre (120). All Passion plays seem to be on the ritual side of Schechner’s entertainment-efficacy briad for their main purpose is to effect changes in the minds of audiences, although the producers and audiences alike take the plays’ entertainment value seriously.

Anthropologist Victor Turner, who worked closely with Schechner, defines ritual as “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effect” (*From Ritual to Theatre* 79), and offers another useful concept to shed light on the ritual aspect of Passion plays: “communitas.” While the word “community” means an area of common living in the geographical sense, “communitas” refers to a group of people without social hierarchy and structure. Putting his observations of Asian and African rituals into the three phases of ritual proposed by the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep—separation, transition and incorporation, he noted that, during a ritual event, the participants’ are temporarily divested of their former social statuses and go through a liminal stage to finally become re-accepted into the society transformed into new beings (i.e. a boy becomes an adult via the rite of passage). The temporary bond created among the participants during the liminal phase is what Turner calls communitas: “the community as a whole, as a homogeneous, unstructured unity that transcends its differentiations and contradictions” (*The Ritual Process* 92). In a similar way, the audience

members of outdoor Passion plays become nameless for the duration the performance, turned into a ritual community sharing the same belief and values while witnessing biblical scenes come to life. The belief aspect of the Passion play *communitas* is what distinguishes it from the audience of an ordinary theatrical performance where one's belief does not matter as much.

The more political views on ritual are held by anthropologists David I. Kertzer and Clifford Geertz whose investigations on the mechanism of ritual are useful to shed light on the political dimension of American Passion plays. Although the two scholars deal with different sites of analysis (Kertzer's research covers existing political rituals around the world with a concentration on Western countries, and Geertz conducted extensive fieldwork in Southeast Asia and North Africa), both have noted that ritual, as an integral part of politics, is essentially political and powerful because of its symbolic construction of reality and emotional engagement. In *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (1988), Kertzer argues that, while ritual has usually been thought of simply as "mere embellishment for more important, 'real' political activities" in the Western world, people make sense of the world through symbols (3). Thus ritual, inherently symbolic by nature, is not only an indispensable part of everyday life but also the primary means by which political groups achieve solidarity and empower themselves. Defining ritual rather broadly as "symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive" (9), he argues that ritual is a universal human phenomenon that is used for social and political ends.

From national party convention to presidential inauguration, from congressional committee hearing to the roar of the football stadium crowd belting out the national anthem, ritual is a ubiquitous part of modern political life. Through ritual aspiring political leaders struggle to assert their right to rule, incumbent power



holders seek to bolster their authority, and revolutionaries try to carve out a new basis of political allegiance. All of these political figures, from leaders of insurrections to champions of the status quo, use rites to create political reality for the people around them. (1)

According to Kertzer, what is as important as the use of symbols as the source of the power of ritual is its “psychological underpinnings.” Ritual is powerful not only because it gives meaning to the world and a sense of connection to individuals but also because it manipulates people with “its frequently dramatic character” (10). Kertzer writes, “Just as emotions are manipulated in the theatre through the ‘varied stimuli of light, colour, gesture, movement, voice,’ so too these elements and others give rituals a means of generating powerful feelings” (11).

Geertz defines religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (“Religion as a Cultural System” 4). He sees ritual as a public occasion of fusing the symbolic world of religion and the real. He goes farther than Kertzer to contend that ritual, in certain cultural contexts, is not simply a means of politics but *is* the politics itself. In *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (1980), Geertz describes how theatrical spectacles served as the expression of political power in Bali and observes that the real and the theatrical were conflated during the rituals put on by the powerful, which did not simply *represent* the reality but *were* the reality.

[The Balinese state] was a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, tooth fillings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. . . . Behind this, to us, strangely reversed relationship between the substance and the trappings of rule lies a general conception of the nature and basis of sovereignty that, merely for simplicity, we may call the doctrine of the exemplary center. This is the theory that the court-capital is at once a microcosm of the supernatural order—"an image of . . . the universe on a smaller scale"—and the material embodiment of political order. It is not just the nucleus, the engine, or the pivot of the state, it *is* the state. (13)

According to him, the histrionics of the Balinese authorities was a "crucial task of legitimation—the reconciliation of this political metaphysics with the existing distribution of power" and the legitimation was "effected by means of myth" (14). The most telling example of the highly theatrical nature of the politics of the Hinduist state of *negara* is the funeral ceremony of the

Rajah, where his living concubines join the late king in the burning tower.<sup>1</sup> The symbolic spectacle demonstrates “an unbreakable inner connection between social rank and religious condition” and is “an argument, made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe, and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less, to those of the divine” (102). Although the question as to exactly what role theatricality plays in American politics and to what degree still remains, both Kertzer’s and Geertz’ views on ritual provide theoretical lenses to discern how American Passion plays construct a reality based on the sacred narrative and how this reality may be used for political ends.

As Kertzer and Geertz noticed, the power of Passion plays as rituals derives from the sacred symbols of the Bible and the paramount symbol is, of course, Jesus Christ. The character of Jesus is not only one of the most popular cultural commodities in many religious communities but also the supreme symbol which is imbued with otherworldly presence and has had considerable impact on American culture at large.<sup>2</sup> In *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (2003), Stephen Prothero wittily illustrates the American fascination with Jesus in both Christian sectors and non-Christian camps.

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<sup>1</sup> Geertz’ quote of the detailed description of the cremation ceremony (98-102) originally comes from L. V. Helms’ *Pioneering in the Far East and Journeys to California in 1849 and to the White Sea in 1848* (1882).

<sup>2</sup> According to a Rasmussen Reports telephone survey released on April 4, 2010, 81% of the American population believe that Jesus was the Son of God who died for their sins and 78% believe that he was resurrected from the dead (“78% Think Jesus Christ Rose from the Dead”).

In the United States . . . more than two out of every three citizens say they have made a “personal commitment to Jesus Christ” and approximately three out of four report they have sensed his presence. Yet Jesus is not the exclusive property of Christians. Polls reveal that Americans of all faiths view Jesus “overwhelmingly in a favorable light” and that he has “a strong hold even on those with no religious training.” Amazingly, nearly half of the country’s non-Christians believe that Jesus was born from a virgin and raised from the dead. Here atheists and Buddhists are active producers and consumers of images of Jesus, who in many respects functions as common cultural coin. Talk to a Hindu and she might tell you that Jesus is an avatar of the god Vishnu. Ask a Jew and you might be told that he was a great rabbi. In a bestselling novel from 1925, Bruce Barton described Jesus as *The Man Nobody Knows*. Today he is the man nobody hates.

Jesus is also ubiquitous in American popular culture. On the radio, Mick Jagger and Bono sing about looking for the Buddha but finding Jesus Christ. In movie theatres, Jesus films open every few years, as do Jesus plays and musicals on and off Broadway. Readers also have a voracious appetite for Jesus. The Library of Congress holds more books about Jesus (seventeen thousand or so) than about any other historical figure, roughly twice as many as the runner-up (Shakespeare), and Jesus books there are piling up fast.

Finally, Jesus is a fixture on the American landscape—on highway billboards, bumper stickers, and even tattooed bodies. A hot-air balloon Jesus,

complete with a purple robe identifying him as “King of Kings, Lord of Lords,” can be seen flying across western states. Not far from Disney World, there is a Jesus theme park called The Holy Land Experience. “Christ of the Ozarks,” a seven-story statue of a risen Christ, lords over Eureka Springs, Arkansas. (11-12)

While the American Jesus has been a chameleon figure reshaped and adapted by historical and cultural circumstances, it is indubitable that Jesus has been the most influential religious icon in the United States. The plays that reenact the “Greatest Story Ever Told,” according to which the Son of God died for the salvation of the mankind out of infinite love, using spectacular visual and auditory effects are likely to provide a powerful emotional and spiritual experience for the audience.

The symbol of Jesus works on another level in the ritual context due to his dual nature. Believed to be both divine and human, Jesus himself serves as a medium between the spiritual reality and the mundane reality and lays the foundation for the conflation of the two different worlds. On top of this theological basis, the three Passion plays that I attended employ various strategies, both direct and indirect, to link their theatrical representations with the contemporary reality of the audience. These include an opening narration that says what they are about to present is a true story that has personal meaning to each spectator, the incorporation of modern characters as the narrators/commentators of the action and their interaction with the biblical characters, an altar call, testimonies concerning the show’s effect, a closing monologue exhorting the audience to make a personal commitment to Jesus and the cast’s post-play interaction with the audience. These methods, some crude and some creative, are meant to achieve a reality effect,

fusing the past events represented on stage and the spectator's reality. We will look at specific examples of these endeavors in each chapter.

Finally, anthropologist Catherine Bell complements the various ideas of ritual introduced so far with her most sophisticated and flexible theory of ritual. In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), she challenges the conventional academic approaches to ritual based on the deep-rooted action-thought dichotomy as an invention of the Western academic apparatus. Carefully reviewing the major scholarly discourses on ritual represented by anthropologists Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Stanley Tambiah and so on, she argues that the theoretical construction of ritual is eventually “a reflection of the theorist's method and the motor of a discourse in which the concerns of theorist take center stage” (*Ritual Theory* 54). It should be noted here that she does not necessarily seek to dispute the dichotomy of belief (myth) and action (ritual as its reenactment) *per se* as an obsolete theoretical framework, but she problematizes the ways in which the schema, once accepted by the major theorists, has been transferred to other larger areas to be used in a perfunctory manner without carefully examining its applicability. More significantly, such theories widened the gap between the theorist as the observer of a ritual and its participant as an object of analysis: “Most simply, we might say, ritual is to the symbols it dramatizes as action is to thought; and on a second level, ritual integrates thought and action; and on a third level, a focus on ritual performances integrates *our* thought and *their* action” (*Ritual Theory* 32). In order to avoid falling into the same trap of objectifying ritual by detaching it from its particular cultural context, she abandons the term “ritual” in favor of the postmodern alternative concept “ritualization.”

[Ritualization] is the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the power of human actors. (*Ritual Theory* 74)

In short, ritualization is the process of *how* certain activities become ritual in relation to other activities rather than *what* ritual is by itself, and the former question hinges on the context of a particular activity and the participants' "sense of ritual" rather than some fixed forms and patterns observable by the outsider. According to Bell, the "sense of ritual" refers to the inherited sense of enacting and responding to public activities by which the "members of a society know how to improvise a birthday celebration, stage an elaborate wedding, or rush through a minimally adequate funeral" for instance (*Ritual Theory* 80). The significance of this notion is that, first, ritual is a culture-specific performance that should be understood within the frame of the particular social, cultural and political context; second, a ritual's meaning is not fixed by tradition or simply determined by the producer or the dominant class but always negotiated through the process of consent and resistance.

Bell's contextual understanding of ritual resonates with Geertz' concept of "thick description." In "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Geertz states that the anthropologist's task today is first to understand what doing ethnography means. Not a

matter of methods, techniques or procedures, an ethnographer's job is not so much viewing a certain phenomenon as an isolated event from the outsider's point of view as it is situating the event in its wider socio-cultural context to understand it as somebody inside the culture who is informed by the local knowledge would—what he, borrowing a notion from Gilbert Ryle, calls “an elaborate venture” in “thick description” (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 6).

Looking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms brings out not, as has so often been claimed, the arbitrariness of human behavior, but the degree to which its meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed. Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity. It renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity. (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 14)

Therefore, in terms of synthesizing Bell and Turner's points, it is important to acknowledge at this point that the study does not claim that all Passion plays *are* rituals but demonstrates through thick description how they can *become* ritualized activities in some particular contexts. Bell's notion of ritualization helps us to view how the Passion plays become extraordinary in their production and reception. Featuring the “Greatest Story Ever Told,” the Passion plays are produced and attended as performances more important than a secular one, and they appeal to both intellect and emotion by resonating with the audience's “sense of ritual” through the use of familiar images based on the familiar narrative.



To recapitulate what has been discussed so far, the ritual characteristics of American Passion plays can be summarized as: 1) the plays are reenactments of what is usually called “myth” in anthropological language: the sacred narrative of the Passion that many Americans still believe; 2) their profound meaning is communicated through biblical symbols; 3) they do not simply represent the biblical reality of the past in isolation but the events performed on stage always have connection with the contemporary world; 4) they are usually differentiated from and considered to be more important than other ordinary performance events; 5) they are not just entertainment but are meant to achieve some sort of efficacy. All of these factors serve as the source of their power as more than a play and are at the same time reasons why the performances matter and should be handled with extra care.

There is another term which I put forward in contrast to ritual and thus needs to be explained: postmodern theatre. Postmodern theatre is a type of theatre which reflects major tenets of postmodernism of the sort described by Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari as introduced earlier, and the four passion plays discussed in Part II belong to this group. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard gave his groundbreaking definition of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). By “metanarratives” (also known as “grand narratives”), Lyotard meant what he thought were modernist narratives such as Fascism, which sought universal legitimation with power, and Christianity in its universal project of “the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love” (*The Postmodern Explained* 17-18). He argued that in postmodernity the System based on metanarratives that promotes the principles of unity and efficiency should be challenged with alternate points of view, the so called “small narratives” (*petit récit*; also called

“micro-narratives”). In the parlance of ritual studies, Lyotard’s term “metanarrative” would be equivalent to what is called “myth,” the legitimized sacred narrative that ritual is supposed to reenact, such as the Passion of Christ. As we will see in the second part dealing with the passion plays, the most notable phenomenon in the postmodern theatre is the metanarrative of the Passion localized and made smaller.

Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “rhizome” also is a useful postmodern concept, not only to illustrate the differences between the passion plays and the Passion plays, but also to represent an alternate model of ritual. As an image of thought contrary to the “tree” structure of knowledge, the rhizome is a non-hierarchical, horizontal organic entity with the One subtracted ( $n-1$ ).

[U]nlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. . . . It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with  $n$  dimensions having neither subject nor object, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which the One is always subtracted ( $n-1$ ). (21)

If two of the major characteristics of the Passion plays are the centrality of Jesus and the unity of the Apostles in terms of race and gender (and maybe sexuality too) based on the original biblical text, the passion plays displace the central figure ( $n-1$ ) and introduce heterogeneous narratives of diverse minority figures who do away with the traditional ideas of authority and hierarchy. In

conjunction with Lyotard's view of postmodernism, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome provides a way to capture how the grand narrative of the Passion is adapted into small narratives in the postmodern theatre.

The dissertation is comprised of two parts. In the first part, I start with a brief history of American Passion play tradition, and then, over the course of three separate chapters, I investigate why outdoor Passion plays such as *The New Great Passion Play*, *The Promise* and *The Man Who Ran* can have a powerful influence on a large audience and the community. Each chapter begins with the background information of a Passion play including its production history, production process and setting, mostly drawn from its publicity materials. I then share my own observations of the major scenes of the show backed up by the information obtained during my conversation with the executive director or the director and relate how the representations of the biblical narrative contribute to the ritualization of the performance in light of the aforementioned theories. Here, the focal points include both the uses of biblical symbols and the strategies of differentiation and bridging the biblical world and the contemporary reality.

Ultimately, I provide my own critical reflection on the Passion play in light of the postmodern agenda introduced earlier, that is, how much diversity the Passion play promotes, considering its possible social, cultural and political impact. Here, race might appear to be the central theme, especially when I deal with the racial composition of the cast and the representation of the Jewish religious leaders. This is due mainly to the fact that race is the most visible sign of diversity in theatrical representation and the question of race has often been the most problematic site in American history. However, the discussion of diversity is not limited to race only but includes gender and sexuality as well. Each of these three topics will be addressed

where it seems relevant and significant so as to criticize how a Passion play can form an American “metanarrative” to function as a ritual for the majority.

The three Passion plays analyzed in Part I, in varying degrees, try to historically reconstruct the Gospel narratives, which are set in a different place and time than our own. In first century Palestine, there was higher racial and ethnic homogeneity among the people than in the contemporary United States, slavery was taken for granted, women were disenfranchised and people did not have the same understanding of homosexuality as we do now. Granting that there is value in viewing the Passion narrative in light of its contemporary setting, there seem to be some challenges involved in trying to make its theatrical representation historically accurate in today’s political context. First of all, the Four Gospels, like the other still-extant documents produced in the same period and culture, are male-centered ethnic narratives in which Gentiles and women play minimal roles, and all of the Gospels are silent on the topic of homosexuality. There is no reason to adhere to this paradigm, and it is possible to translate it into our contemporary idiom to build a more inclusive representation of the Passion, for the conceptions of race, gender and sexuality found in the Gospel narratives do not constitute the core beliefs of Christianity, nor do they appear to be the eternal truth by which we still need to strictly abide. Rather, they, like the conceptions we have now, seem to have been socially constructed and thus need to be reinterpreted in our own context.

Defining race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies,” American sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that there is no essence of race and that different concepts of race arise in different contexts as a result of social and political struggles among different groups (55).

According to Omi and Winant, the modern conception of race occurred with the rise of Europe and the colonization of America, and religion and science served as the major means by which Christian Europe justified the racial difference of the “Others.” The European “racial project” became “racist” as it began to create and reproduce “structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race” according to which non-whites such as African-Americans and Native Americans were intellectually and morally inferior to whites (71). Omi and Winant believe that “today, as in the past, concepts of race structure both state and civil society” and “race continues to shape both identities and institutions in significant ways” (vii). Given this claim of the importance of race to our patterns of thinking, it seems necessary to examine how the essential categories of race, such as African-Americans, Jews, whites, Asians, Latinos and so on, have been constructed and come down to us to affect our social relations and challenge those assumptions.

The traditional understanding of gender and sexuality has come under similar suspicion, a line of investigation which was started by French philosopher Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), he shows how sexuality and sexual practices, which were in no need of secrecy until the beginning of the seventeenth century, came to be repressed to become a tool of institutional power and control. The Victorian regime gave birth to the modern concept of homosexuality through the scientific discourse of the nineteenth century Europe:

“Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). Foucault’s genealogical project aims to demonstrate that there is no essence of sexual categories *per se* and

the general understanding of sexuality, not unlike race, is socially constructed. Following Foucault's logic and quoting Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman," American post-structuralist and feminist scholar Judith Butler contends that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (519; emphasis in original). Some everyday examples of the performative nature of gender include certain ways of dressing, talking, walking associated with a gender as well as the domestic and social roles imposed on women by the male-dominated society. According to Butler, these performative stereotypes have also been sustained by cultural media including theatre, film, TV and so on. In a similar fashion, American scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her foundational book of queer studies *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), takes issues with the fact that, of the "very many dimensions of sexuality" including "preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency" and so on, the "gender object choice" has "remained as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation'" (8). Indeed, it is very interesting that the heterosexual/homosexual distinction came to be the more prominent way to group people as the "same" than other sexual classifications such as pedophile/non-pedophile, frontalist/analist, twosomer/threesomer etc. If the given notions of race, gender and sexuality are not essential but are rather arbitrarily constructed as these scholars observed, one does not need to accept and hold on to them as "truth," and any categorization by what are believed to be "essential" characteristics needs to be re-examined and challenged. American Passion/passion plays can be a good site to do so since they are a convergence of the ancient narrative, which reflects the worldview of the first century,

and the contemporary American religious discourse. As we observe how the plays represent race, gender and sexuality, we are able to notice their underlying assumptions and draw some conclusion about the relationship between religion and politics.

The more fundamental challenge in making a “historically accurate” Passion play, or any play, has to do with the contested status of the concept of “history” itself. As with the categories of race, gender and sexuality, our understanding of “history” is continuously reshaped by the dominant discourse of the time. The idea that we can reproduce something exactly the same way it was two thousand years ago belongs to an essentialist way of thinking: that everything has an essence we can always know and get access to. We often tend to accept what is normative as historically accurate when it is simply what we have uncritically received from our previous generation or a product of our own time. For instance, several paintings of Jesus by European and American artists have long captivated the popular imagination and accepted as authentic representations even though no one knows what he looked like and how he and the Apostles celebrated the Last Supper. Thus, strictly speaking, there is no way to achieve complete historical accuracy and often those who aim to do so end up reproducing old assumptions even when they believe that what they are doing is authentic. This awareness of our limitations in terms of “historical accuracy” is not supposed to merely frustrate our search for truth and authenticity but rather open up new space for imagination and creativity, which can also be channeled into the representations of race, gender and sexuality to reflect what is happening in our culture and society.

So far, I have provided the theoretical foundation for the critical analysis of the Passion plays to be conducted at the end of each chapter in Part I. However, it should be noted at this

point that the focus of the dissertation is not on the theories themselves. While I put the Passion plays in the deconstructive framework of Omi and Winant, Foucault, Butler and Sedgwick, the point is not to generate a theoretical elaboration in terms of the specific categories of race, gender and sexuality, but to make critical observations as to how well the Passion plays mirror the manifold dimensions that form postmodern America. The overarching aim of the study is to investigate the co-existence of multiple Passion/passion “rituals” in diversified forms and its meaning in the contemporary United States.

Within this macro-frame, the second part of the dissertation pits the Passion plays against four contemporary mainstream passion plays performed in the mode of critique. The analysis of the latter using the postmodern theories introduced above will illuminate the ritual dimensions of the former as counter-examples and delineate how they supply alternate models of ritual for the diverse minority in the country. Chapter 4 examines how Ruhl’s *Passion Play: A Cycle* and Kennedy’s *Motherhood 2000* defamiliarize Passion plays by putting them in metatheatrical frames, analogous to the techniques of the epic theatre of the German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht and the Forum Theatre developed by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal respectively, in order to shed light on the relationship between the Passion plays and the politics. In Chapter 5, we will see how the Passion narrative is transformed into micro-narratives of the passion by McNally and Guirgis in *Corpus Christi* and *Our Lady of 120th Street* to dramatize the tribulations of contemporary individuals. Regardless of their dramaturgical differences, the passion plays, characterized by the replacement of the metanarrative with micro-narratives, absence of center and pluralism, provide cogent critiques on the politics of Passion plays and demonstrate how the aesthetic tactics can turn these plays, which have the potential to become



oppressive rituals when abused, into postmodern theatre and alternate rituals that empower the minority.

The comparative analysis of the Passion/passion plays makes a tenable case that metanarratives do not cease to exist but continue to serve various groups as small narratives in postmodernity. Although the normative way of interpreting and representing the Passion of Christ may have loosened its grip on the popular imagination, the Passion still remains the source of the profound meaning in its postmodern tributaries: the micro-narratives of the passion. Further, what makes the transition from the Passion to the passion possible is the human side of the dual nature of Jesus, enabling different groups to identify themselves with this holy figure followed by two million Americans. The most popular and widely accepted example, as mentioned above, is the white, fair-haired, blue-eyed European image of Jesus which has a long history in Western art represented by the Renaissance painters such as Michelangelo and da Vinci, who provided Western archetypes of Jesus for later artists.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, H. B. Warner's portrayal of Jesus in the film *King of Kings* (1961), paintings of the German artist Heinrich Hoffman (1824-1911)<sup>4</sup> which "appeared in hundreds of books and hung in countless homes and churches," and *Head of Christ* by the American painter Warner Sallman (1892-1968) which was "reproduced in almost every imaginable form" and became "the most common

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<sup>3</sup> Tait and Gorder note that it was "not until Leonard Da Vinci and Rembrandt's day that Christ and early disciples 'became European': "Early portraits, such as the second century catacomb of Dormitillia in Rome, show Jesus as dark skinned. Medieval Europea religious art has as many as 'six hundred known depictions of a Black Madonna with Child'" (26).

<sup>4</sup> Three of his paintings, *Christ in the Temple* (1871), *Christ and the Young Rich Man* (1889), and *Christ in Gethsemane* (1890), were purchased by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and now are displayed at the Riverside Church in New York City.

religious image in the world” continued and popularized the tradition of white Jesus (Prothero 116). The international popularity of the pictures can be substantiated by the fact that even I remember seeing a few reproduced images of Hoffmann’s and Sallman’s Jesus hanging on the wall of the homes and churches I visited with my parents during my childhood in South Korea, which led me to assume at that time that they were authentic representations of Jesus. However, it goes without saying that the representation of Jesus in European portraits is far from the truth; we do not need the enormous historical research conducted in the field to prove its falsity. While nobody really knows what Jesus looked like, we at least know that he was a Galilean Jew who would have been olive-skinned and had Semitic features and therefore did not look like the European Jesuses made prevalent in Euro-American cultures by the popular paintings and films. All of these examples reveal that people tend to imagine him just like themselves.

Yet, Jesus has never been the possession of one dominant group only. Instead, the symbol of Jesus has been the supreme sign through which people of diverse backgrounds interpret their lives and endow them with transcendental meaning; in particular, minority groups such as the proletariat, women, African-Americans and homosexuals have internalized the Passion of Christ to make sense of their tribulations and sublimated it through art. Notable modern examples include Bouck White’s novel *The Call of the Carpenter* (1911), Langston Hughes’ poem *Christ in Alabama* (1931), Renee Cox’s montage of five photographs *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (1996), Terrence McNally’s play *Corpus Christi* (1998), Northern Catholic Reporter’s “Jesus 2000” competition winner Janet McKenzie’s painting *Jesus of the People* (2000), Peter, Paul & Mary’s song dedicated to Matthew Shepard and James Byrd *Jesus Is On the Wire* (2001) and Jean-Claude La Marre’s film *Colors of the Cross* (2006), most of which caused some level of

controversy. Add to this list the pictures and sculptures of Native American, Chinese and cowboy Jesuses occupying the walls and aisles of many American museums. All these examples show that Jesus is not just a symbol of the dominant group but also a sign that can be appropriated by the minority for identity-building and empowerment. As long as history repeats itself by producing martyrs and the oppressed, Jesus will keep returning as a protean figure with a different skin color, gender, sexuality, etc. Genesis 1:27 says that God created people in his own image, and now we witness the interesting phenomenon that people recreate their God in their own images. The passion plays looked at in Part II are simply a theatrical fragment of the countless representations of Jesus, which demonstrate that the metanarrative wears many different faces in the postmodern culture.

Kertzer points out that the Durkheimian view of ritual largely ignored the social conflict; he argues that “ritual can promote social solidarity without implying that people share the same values, or even the same interpretation of the ritual” due to the inherent ambiguity of symbols. He writes, “It is the very ambiguity of the symbols employed in ritual action that makes ritual useful in fostering solidarity without consensus. Symbols can have a strong emotional impact on people, rallying them around the organizational flag, in spite of the fact that each participant interprets the symbols differently” (69). This partially explains the fact that American Passion plays bring together people from different Catholic and Protestant backgrounds who would disagree on many theological issues, including their understandings of Jesus and his teachings. The plays can unite them during the performance since they are essentially symbolic and each audience member can have a different take on the symbols being represented. For some, Jesus is the Son of God, both human and divine, while others may think he was a great moral teacher but

no more. For some, Jesus is an upholder of the institution, while for others he represents a rebel against the institution. Similarly, Jesus can be seen as the central symbol of “a white man’s religion” or a defender of the minority for groups such as African-Americans and homosexuals. As Richard Fox notes, “It is tempting to suppose that Christian belief has had such staying power in America because it provides respectable conformity, relief from anxiety, or a promise of eternal happiness. Yet some people find Christianity compelling because it provides an alternative to conformity, or a correction to their complacency” (405-6). Indeed, the malleability of Jesus based on his humanity and suffering is perhaps the primary reason for his enduring presence in the historical and cultural memory of many Americans.

Secondly, the interdisciplinary analysis of the Passion/passion plays as both theatre and ritual does not merely show its hermeneutical value but even substantiates its necessity. In *Perform or Else* (2001), Jon McKenzie notes that “[t]oday, the field of cultural performance and the paradigm of performance studies cannot be *thought* without citing theatre and ritual” (49), and the limitations of the previous studies on American Passion plays seem to corroborate this statement. For instance, Monk’s and Chansky’s observations are limited mostly to the discussion of the plays’ artistic value, historical accuracy of representation and/or character stereotypes without attempting a constructive understanding of the performances based on detailed analysis of their efficacy mechanism. Some specific issues of a pure theatrical analysis of performance may include: overlooking the pre-play and the post-play that form an integral part of the whole performance sequence; paying little attention to the ways in which the performance endows its symbols with profound meaning and audiences negotiate the meaning as active participants of the meaning-making process; and being unable to articulate how each performance uses different

strategies to make itself more than a play and fuse the theatrical representation of the Passion and the reality of the audience. Conversely, the major problem of a pure ritual approach would be lacking sophisticated terms to evaluate the artistic/entertainment value and creativity of performance and to describe how the theatrical aspects contribute to its “success.” Therefore, the incorporation of the two different fields into the analysis of Passion plays is a prerequisite to the comprehensive understanding of the performances, and the next step is to bring in other perspectives that would enrich the understanding achieved in the current research.

Closely examining the particular type of performances called Passion/passion plays, the study, on the microscopic level, is expected to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the efficacy of performance, issues of representation in general and the relationship between religion and theatre. On the macroscopic level, it is intended as a showcase of difficult dialogues. Trying to sympathize with both the Passion and the passion while being critical of some of their political aspects, I wish to demonstrate that a dialogue between two opposed groups, the conservative and the liberal, Christians and non-Christians, is possible and a middle ground can be found. Hopefully, this is one small path that will ultimately lead to a society in which there is no more “passion” because of differences.

## Part I. Passion Plays as Ritual

In the first part, I examine how three Midwestern Passion plays, *The New Great Passion Play*, *The Promise* and *The Man Who Ran*, work as both theatre and ritual in terms of their artistic value and ritual mechanism and what kind of political issues each version of the “Greatest Story Ever Told” raises. The three outdoor Passion plays dealt with here are only three of the tens of Passion plays being performed across the United States, and they have been selected because of their reputation and the diversity they offer in terms of region, format and scope. *The New Great Passion Play*, located in the Arkansas Ozarks, is a straight play presenting the major events that happened during the Passion Week. It is not only the most attended outdoor drama in the country but also boasts its longest history of all outdoor American Passion plays surviving today. *The Promise*, a musical covering the whole life of Jesus presented every summer at the Texas Amphitheater in Glen Rose, Texas, is probably the highest quality Passion play by theatrical standards in the country despite its shortest history. *The Man Who Ran* in Disney, Oklahoma, is smaller in scale than the other two but is an interesting example since it combines the story of Jonah with the Passion narrative.

In order to better understand the context of these contemporary American Passion plays, it would be helpful to briefly chart the history of the Passion play tradition in the western world. According to Monk, “the Passion play itself is rooted in the liturgical drama that emerged in Europe during the latter part of the tenth century,” the earliest extant source being the now well-known *Regularis Concordia* which includes the trope of *Quem Queritis* (also known as *Visitatio*

*Sepulchri*) reenacting Mary's visitation to Jesus' empty tomb as part of an Easter liturgy (20).

Although there are disputes about the exact origin of the Passion play representing the Crucifixion, the two earliest texts that have survived are a Latin Passion text (c. 1150) found at the monastery of Montecassino, Italy, and the *Carmina Burana* manuscript (1230), which contains two Passion plays *Ludus Breviter* and *Ludus de Passione* (1200-1225), found at the monastery of Benediktneueren, Bavaria, Germany (Monk 22-23). The biblical dramas of the Medieval Europe grew in scope and size and eventually moved out of the church to be produced by the laity becoming more and more elaborate and spectacular. Some notable Passion plays of the period include the Vienna Passion play, the St. Gall Passion play, the oldest Frankfort Passion play, the Maestricht Passion play and English cycle plays.

After the Middle Ages, *The Oberammergau Passion Play*, now the world's most famous Passion play, began in Bavaria, Germany, in 1634. According to the legend, the people of Bavaria had made a vow to God that, if He spared their lives from the plague that struck surrounding villages, they would perform a Passion play every ten years, and they were miraculously saved. In 2010, the play had its 41st season and has drawn more than four hundred thousand visitors from all around the world. In Spain, *The Mystery Play of Elche* has continued to be performed annually for six centuries. Monk notes that "[e]lsewhere during the 1700s and 1800s religious dramas no longer played a major role in their respective societies" (30), only a few locales continuing with the tradition of regular religious festivals and dramas, and this can probably be explained by the Reformation and the rise of the Puritans who disapproved theatre. In the twentieth century, revivals of medieval Passion plays and new ones have been performed

in Europe and Americas, although the institutional character of the religious dramas have been significantly weakened.

Compared to the European tradition, Passion plays in the United States have a much shorter history. Interestingly, the first professional production of the Passion in the country was mounted by Salmi Morse (1826-84), a Jew converted to Christianity. With a view to presenting a play about Jesus without the anti-Semitic undertone of *The Oberammergau Passion Play*, he wrote and produced *The Passion* at San Francisco's Grand Opera House in 1879, financed by E. J. "Lucky" Baldwin, with James O'Neill (1847-1920) playing the main role and David Belasco as the designer and director. Unfortunately, eleven of those involved in the production including O'Neill and Belasco were arrested after a few weeks "in violation of a city ordinance" that prohibited impersonation of Jesus (Nielsen 105). Next year, Morse and the leading players moved to New York to produce *The Passion* but Morse failed to get the license again, and the four years of legal battles between Morse and those who denounced the play ended with the former's defeat and his body found floating along the banks of the Hudson River in February, 1884. To the public, he was not a victim of prejudice and intolerance but a despised Jew who dared to write and produce a play depicting the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ. Although the cause of his death is uncertain, the tragic story shows how the Victorian America thought of theatre and the artistic representation of the divine before the twentieth century. After Morse's death, O'Neill first tried to produce the play in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1889 using the income he had gained from *Monte Cristo*, but this and his two more attempts in 1891 and 1896 were all aborted by the people who "refused to accept it as anything but the sacrilege it had been declared in 1879" (Nielsen 229).



However, Morse's dream of planting a Passion play that would be on a par with the German Passion play without being anti-Semitic in the American soil was finally realized on screen. Rich G. Hollaman, the owner of the Eden Musée Wax Museum, got hold of the script and costumes from Albert G. Eaves, Morse's former partner and prominent New York costumer, and filmed a staging of the "sacrilegious" play on the roof of the Grand Central Palace Hotel in New York. Hollaman deliberately advertised it as the Oberammergau Passion play to avoid public censure due to its association with Morse's play, and the film had its first showing at Hollaman's museum on January 30, 1898, to receive not only a widespread approval but also rave reviews. According to an article published in the *Times* magazine on February 6, 1898, "Two or three times since [Morse's death] the scheme had been discussed, but without result. Now the 'Passion Play' is on exhibition here in a modified form, and no one has expressed amazement or anger" (qtd. in Nielson 231). Although the film's success would have been a result of various factors, it demonstrates that a significant part of the fierce public reaction to Morse's play had to do with its medium of representation: theatre. Associated with immorality, lasciviousness and blasphemy in the western history for a long period of time, theatre was yet to find its legitimate place in the American religious culture.<sup>5</sup>

As the country entered the twentieth century, however, the positive value of religious dramas began to be recognized. In 1896, the California State Supreme Court reversed a Superior Court judge's decision to ban a play based on a murder case still being tried ruling that it was an infringement on the freedom of speech. According to Nielsen, this was "the first instance found

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<sup>5</sup> For the full account of the drama surrounding Morse's *The Passion*, please refer to Alan Nielsen's *The Great Victorian Sacrilege: Preachers, Politics and The Passion, 1879-1884* (see Works Cited).

of any state court's ruling that a play in, in fact, a form of speech" (225). Although this one decision did not immediately improve the moral status of theatre across the country, it is an indication of changing attitudes towards theatre, and many Passion play productions followed. These include *Nazareth* written by Clay M. Greene and produced in Santa Clara, California, in 1901, *Mary Magdala* which opened in New York the following year, a traditional Passion play written by Father Josaphat Kraus and mounted by the Franciscan fathers at St. Boniface's Church in San Francisco (1909), Christine Wetherill Stevenson's *The Pilgrimage* (1920) in California, *The American Passion Play*<sup>6</sup> (1924) produced by Delmar D. Darrah (1868-1945) at the Scottish Rite Temple in Bloomington, Indiana, Willa Saunders Jones' *The Resurrection* (1926-1980s) in Chicago, Illinois, the Mormon Easter Pageant *Jesus the Christ* staged annually on the grounds of the Mesa Arizona Temple since 1928, and the German immigrant Josef Meier's touring with a troupe of German actors in the country with *The Luenen Passion Play* in 1932.

Among these, two Passion plays deserve a little more attention: Jones' *The Resurrection* and Meier's *The Black Hills Passion Play*. Willa Saunders Jones (1901-1979) was a black music director and singer from Little Rock, Arkansas, and she moved to Chicago to produce what she initially conceived of as an Easter pageant. Her Passion play, once widely known as "The Black Passion Play" and later also called *The Crucifixion*, is the biggest-scale and most famous American Passion play ever produced and performed by African-Americans. Its success can be

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<sup>6</sup> In the first season, the play used a translucent life-like figure to represent Jesus, and an actor played the role from the second season on following the success of the first year. The temple was renamed as Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts, and *The American Passion Play* is having its 89th consecutive season at the same indoor venue in 2012.

discerned from the fact that it was performed at multiple venues including local churches, a high school auditorium and Civic Opera House for decades until it got closed due to the lack of sufficient financial support in the 1980s. The socio-cultural significance of the play lies in that it was not only one of the few African-American Passion plays in the period but also later featured racially mixed casts including whites in major and minor roles. According to Brian James Hallstoos, the play connected racial violence with the crucifixion and “fostered hope and interracial amity by evoking racial uplift through [Christ’s] resurrection” when Jim Crow laws still kept blacks and whites separate (2).

Josef Meier settled in Spearfish, South Dakota, in the summer of 1939 and changed the name of the German play he had brought from his hometown Luenen to *The Black Hills Passion Play*, making it the first outdoor Passion play regularly performed in America. Until he retired in 1998, Meier portrayed Jesus for more than fifty years in two different locations: in the Black Hills of South Dakota during the summer season and at the amphitheatre of Lake Wales<sup>7</sup> in Florida during the winter season. Although the play is no longer performed since Meier’s last performance on August 31, 1998, it will remain the first and one of the most famous outdoor Passion plays in the country.

Of the many other Passion plays that followed, some notable ones that are still performed include *The New Great Passion Play* (1968) in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, *The Living Word* (1974) in Cambridge, Ohio, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1982) which began in Puyallup, Washington, and

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<sup>7</sup> The Lake Wales amphitheatre became the winter home for the show in 1953. It was shut down with Meier’s retirement in 1998 but reopened in 2002 with *The Life of Christ Passion Play* brought from Tennessee by Jimmy Baker who also portrayed the main role. In 2004, however, the amphitheater was closed again due to Hurricane Charlie which severely damaged the facility.

later moved to Munster, Indiana, *The Witness* (1985) in Hot Springs, Arkansas, *The Man Who Ran* (1985) in Disney, Oklahoma, *The Promise* (1989) in Glen Rose, Texas, and *The Story of Jesus* (1990) in Wauchula, Florida. The outburst of the Passion play phenomena in the twentieth century America suggests that theatre and Christianity are no longer at odds with each other in the country. On the other hand, considering the number of Passion plays still going on and their popularity across the country, the little attention paid by theatre scholars to the particular type of theatre is remarkable, which seems to suggest that the Passion plays have been regarded as something other than theatre.

The three chapters in the first part have similar structures, covering the history and my own observations of the three Passion plays in terms of the ritual theories and politics. And yet, each chapter reflects a different focus, which will be reviewed against its counterpart in the second part for further clarification. The first chapter takes note of the ways in which *The New Great Passion Play* constructs a ritual environment and uses biblical symbols. And then I speculate why the lack of racial diversity and the normative representation of Jesus in the play might be problematic in political terms. In the second chapter about *The Promise*, I investigate how the production, orchestrated by a director with a rich background in the professional theatre, tries to differentiate itself from other contemporary religious dramas and how the use of three modern characters, supernatural beings such as Satan and angels, music, the pre-show and the post-play interaction between the cast and the audience all serve the play's ritual ends. Of particular interest here in terms of politics is the show's representation of the Jewish religious leaders. Chapter 3 looks at the ritual strategies used in *The Man Who Ran* for its efficacy and makes some observations on the sincerity of performance and the difference between the church

and the Passion play. The last chapter also recapitulates the three plays' differences in terms of scene selection, characters, facility, casting, acting, design, ritualizing strategies etc. In addition, I look at the roles played by women in the three plays and how the literal representation of the male-centered Passion narrative can limit female participation. At the same time, since none of the Passion plays deal with the topic of homosexuality, I reflect on their silence and speculate how the hetero-normative representation of the Passion can be exclusive to the sexual minority, thereby failing to invite and embrace "different" people into their rituals. These analyses of the Passion plays show that they are more than just plays and therefore need to be approached with what I call "ritual awareness." Only when we recognize the nature and power of the "ritual" performances, we will be able to understand the stakes, identify the sources of their power and become more careful in both performing and watching them.

## Chapter 1. *The New Great Passion Play*<sup>8</sup> in Eureka Springs, Arkansas

Performed amidst the natural beauty of the Arkansas Ozarks, *The New Great Passion Play* is “America’s #1 attended outdoor drama” according to the Institute of Outdoor Drama at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. This chapter begins with an introduction to the peculiar setting of Eureka Springs in the Ozarks, which makes the city not only a popular tourist destination but also an ideal location for the presentation of the modern mystery play, and the history of the play. And then basing on my three attendances of the play on September 18, 2009, August 28, 2010, and September 2, 2011, I describe how the play provides a powerful experience of the Passion and unpack the multiple factors that make it “more than just a play” including its symbols, open seating arrangement, sense of ritual and so on. These observations are subsequently related to the politics of the performance, and the major issue I tackle here is the predominance of white actors. Although the lack of diversity could be dismissed as simply reflecting the local demographics, it seems necessary that some improvement be made considering the essentially political nature of ritual and possible ramifications of the powerful representation. The analysis of the ritual dimensions of the Passion play shows that 1) a performance analysis needs to not only take its extra-theatrical components, its ritual dimensions in this case, into account but also have and develop the vocabulary to do so, since the power of

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<sup>8</sup> *The Great Passion Play* was renamed as *The New Great Passion Play* a couple of years ago to reflect some changes made in the production regarding the script and the music for the play. One notable change is the adoption of the New Living Translation (NLT) instead of the Old King James Version (KJV) as the source text. The play will be referred as the former in the general and historical sense and as the latter (“New”) when I discuss the specific productions I saw in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

performance is not solely determined, and cannot be assessed, by its theatrical value and 2) representation brings underlying beliefs and assumptions, especially concerning what is normative or not, out on to the surface, and, for that reason, theatre can be a good site to challenge and negotiate the assumptions based on the status quo.

### **Eureka Springs and the Sacred Projects**

The small town of Eureka Springs I arrived at through the lush hills of the Ozark Mountains was peaceful and inviting. If the popular image of the Ozarks as a whole is “set apart physically by rugged terrain and sociologically by inhabitants who profess political conservatism, religious fundamentalism and sectarianism, and a strong belief in the values of rural living” (Rafferty 1), Eureka Springs seems to be an exception as a popular tourist destination visited by many outsiders called “furriners” by the Ozarkers. A couple of gay pride flags hanging on a wooden house greeted me as I entered the city in the summer of 2010. Along with many private art shops and galleries adorning the main street, the flags gave me the impression that the small rural town sitting in the middle of the Bible Belt and best known for one of the most religious plays in the country was not inhabited by the most conservative people in America. A resident artist who owns her own painting shop in The Art Colony testified to it by saying that Eureka Springs has “a lot of diversity.” According to her, they have a sizeable Latino population and townspeople are not homophobic but welcome difference (Eureka Springs is actually the first city in Arkansas to recognize gay marriage). While the mountain village might take pride in its liberal community, however, its racial and ethnic demography is not quite diverse. According to

Census 2010,<sup>9</sup> 95.3% of the city's total population 2,073 are white while other racial groups take up very little portions: Hispanic 4.3%, Native American 3.8%, black 1.0%, Asian 0.9%, others 2.8% etc.<sup>10</sup> Given that about 25% of Arkansas population is non-white according to 2010 estimate,<sup>11</sup> there is no doubt that Eureka Springs is a predominantly white city, as most rural Ozarks towns are. During my three visits, I saw several Asians and one black male walking down the main street but they all looked like tourists and most residents seemed to be white.

There is something other than the springs, which once made the city popular, and *The New Great Passion Play* that attracts visitors to Eureka Springs: its pre-modern innocence. Once “a bustling resort city, popular with socialites from Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri, and Chicago, Illinois” (Kovalcik 7), Eureka Springs was almost forgotten to tourists as the popularity of the automobile led them to other more easily accessible sites by car until the 1960s. This abandonment by tourists ironically contributed to the Victorian aura that now characterizes the city boasting its largest collection of Victorian architecture in the Central America as “a special place untouched by time and the stresses of the modern world” (Feldman 2). The city surrounded by the natural wonders of the Ozark Mountains has preserved many 19th century buildings, and

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<sup>9</sup> The demographic category I used for the current study is “Race alone or in combination with one or more other races,” which means that bi- or multi-racial people are shown to belong to two or multiple racial groups. For instance, people who are of black and Asian descent can belong to both “black” and “Asian” categories at the same time. In the same way, a “Hispanic” person can still be a “white” as well depending on their parentage.

<sup>10</sup> The 2010 Census of Carroll County where Eureka Springs belongs presents a similar picture. Of the total population 27,446, 91.7% are white, Hispanic or Latino 12.7%, and Native Americans, blacks and Asians take up only 2.2%, 0.6% and 0.8% respectively.

<sup>11</sup> The biggest non-white racial group is African-Americans who constitute 16.1% of the state population, which is a higher percentage than that of the entire nation (13.6%).



the trolleys circulating the 6.9-square-mile-big city accentuate its nostalgic ambience. The charming village frequented by motorcyclists is a place where the past and the present meet not only in the mundane sense but also in the biblical sense since the city, landmarked by the *Christ of the Ozarks* statue, is the home of *The Great Passion Play* where the 21st century audience get to witness “the Greatest Story Ever Told.”

*The Great Passion Play* was part of the Sacred Projects initiated by Gerald L. K. Smith (1898-1976), a preacher and politician originally from Wisconsin. Looking for a summer home, the Smiths purchased a Victorian mansion called Penn Castle, built in the 1880s, in Eureka Springs with the help of one of their agents in 1964. Enamored of the small village, they began to envision a holy project to develop the region. They first proposed to build a giant statue that would stand tall over the town as “a reminder of God’s providence” in 1965 and founded Elna M. Smith Foundation, named after Mrs. Smith, to support the project (Kovalcik 7-8). The *Christ of the Ozarks*, a white, seven-story-high monumental sculpture, was designed and sculpted by Emmet Sullivan, a former apprentice to Gutzon Borglum who had sculpted the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota. The successful completion of the statue was only the beginning of the five Sacred Projects proposed by Smith and developed and completed under the headship of director Charles F. Robertson, a long-time associate of the Smiths. What followed were *The Great Passion Play*, the Bible museum featuring original King James Bibles and the only Bible signed by all of the original Gideons, the Sacred Arts museum housing thousands of

rare biblical artworks, and the New Holy Land,<sup>12</sup> the Foundation's largest project to replicate ancient Jerusalem. Smith's vision and enthusiasm were the driving force of transforming the remote, quaint village into a world-popular tourist site visited by millions today.

### ***The New Great Passion Play: "More than Just a Play"***

Inspired by the *Christ of the Ozarks*, Smith soon found a natural amphitheatre of Magnetic Mountain, which was close to the statue, suitable to staging a play not unlike the world-famous *Oberammergau Passion Play*, Bavaria, Germany. He shared this idea with Adrian Forrette, who was one of Sullivan's key assistants, and Forrette introduced him to his friend Robert Hyde, a producer, director and actor, who would later become the director and producer of *The Great Passion Play* and also portray Jesus in it from 1968 to 1979.

The Foundation had the construction of the Passion play stage started in the summer of 1967 advertizing the play as *Oberammergau Passion Play*, and it was then when the mountain was renamed Mount Oberammergau. Smith personally chose the staging and seating areas and Hyde oversaw most elements of the production including script writing, set and costume design and soundtrack. On July 14, 1968, *The Great Passion Play* had its historic opening to a small crowd of "distinguished locals, members of the national press, and the genuinely curious" with a cast of mostly amateur actors from the local community, and one commentator was quoted as

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<sup>12</sup> The New Holy Land was closed in 2008 due to the rainstorms that struck the site and they now instead provide The Living Bible Tour, a smaller version of The New Holy Land Tour, within the Passion play campus.

saying: “It is the greatest thing by far of its kind. In fact, it is the only thing of its kind” (Kovalcik 46). Twenty eight thousand people attended the play during its first season and *The Great Passion Play*, its popularity growing year by year, was seen by a million people by 1976 and had its four millionth visitor in 1989 (Kovalcik 29). By now, the largest outdoor drama in the United States running May through October of each year has been seen by over 7.5 million people and the cumulative number is expected to hit 8 million in 2012.<sup>13</sup>

For most visitors to Eureka Springs, the attendance of *The Great Passion Play* is more than theatre-going. It is a “pilgrimage,” not simply because of their belief in the biblical narrative but also because of the spiritual qualities surrounding the performance. First, the play is characterized by its periodicity. Unlike the secular theatre which usually presents different shows each season, the same play about the Passion is regularly performed every summer in Eureka Springs, and many people visit the amphitheatre more than once in their lifetime. Secondly, the drive to Eureka Springs is a journey of its own kind, with natural, peaceful and scenic driveways that take one away from home and everyday life. Entering the Passion play complex on the mountaintop veiled in the natural beauty of the Ozarks can be compared to visiting a shrine isolated from and untouched by the hectic urban life. The entrance to the Passion play complex is marked by a white structure of a wide cylinder shape encircling the Nativity figures of Joseph, Mary and the Child at the center. Once one passes it by, they realize that they are stepping into ‘other’ space, surrounded by the massive stone entrance of the New Holy Land and a rotund chapel on the right and the museum buildings holding a Bible collection and biblical paintings on

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<sup>13</sup> According to Sam Ray, the Executive Director of the play, *The New Great Passion Play* saw a very small drop in audience number in 2010 in spite of the nation-wide economic recession and was seeing some increase in the 2011 season.

the left. The sacred atmosphere of the complex is augmented by the presence of the two major attractions at Elna M. Smith Foundation, the Christ statue and the amphitheatre of Mount Oberammergau, a name that carries the aura of the legendary German play. The amphitheatre boasting its capacity of 4,100 people impresses the visitor not only with its size but also with what they advertize as a period-accurate panoramic set comprised of several life-size buildings designating multiple locations such as Martha's house, the garden of Gethsemane, the Praetorium of Pilate, Lazarus' tomb, the Temple, Golgotha etc., somewhat evoking the Mansions of the medieval theatre. There is something unique about the unfamiliar structures within the frame of the natural landscape of Mount Oberammergau under the canopy of the night sky which transports the audience back to the time of Jesus. The publicity materials further differentiate the show from an ordinary theatrical performance: "tucked away in the beautiful Ozark Mountains of northwest Arkansas is a theatre of life"; "an epic outdoor drama unlike any other"; "the life-changing drama" (*The New Great Passion Play: More Than Just a Play*); "It is our prayer that your spirit be lifted, your heart inspired and your faith renewed as you witness a magnificent performance of The Great Passion Play" ("The Play"). This overtly stated goal of the performance equips the audience with certain expectations of the show, differentiating it from other secular performances in conjunction with other ritual factors.

In terms of Bell's notion of ritualization as essentially differentiation, there are many other elements of *The New Great Passion Play* which imbues the performance with sacredness. Above all, it is a dramatic reenactment of the Passion of Christ, the central narrative of Christianity which has, to a considerable degree, shaped not only the contour of the American history at large but also many individual lives of her citizens. The strong "belief" factor of the

play sets it apart from other secular performances such as a rock concert or a performance of the Ancient Greek drama to frame its experience as ritual, and while belief is an abstract concept invisible to an observer, it is manifest in both the play's producers and audience sides. For instance, it is observable in the commitment of the cast which is a necessary contribution to the continuity of the play. Most of the approximately 250 performers are volunteers from the local community and other regions who consider their participation in the play as ministry and provide food and lodging for themselves out of their own pockets for the six-month period of each season. According to Sam Ray, formerly a Baptist minister originally from Texas with backgrounds mainly in Christian entertainment and now the Executive Director of *The New Great Passion Play* since 2007, 90% of them have been in the play for years and a lot of them were children when they began to act in the play, including the two members who have worked there over 40 years. Considering that the volunteers are scarcely paid and it is a minimum wage job even for those who play the main roles,<sup>14</sup> the devotion of the cast demonstrates that the actors are motivated by other than financial reasons. The public audition they have in March every year is just to fill in the empty roles when people leave. Although the audition is open to anyone regardless of one's religion (as required by the state and federal laws prohibiting discrimination), it is hard to say that what one believes does not matter. Ray admits that it is very rare that they have a non-Christian actor and it would be "very, very uncomfortable" for a non-believing actor to stay in the midst of all the daily Bible study and prayer meetings that they have. Ray recalled that they had hired some non-Christians who worked and eventually got converted and he

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<sup>14</sup> Ray told me that, in the 2011 season, they had four actors playing Jesus and each of them made about \$1,000 per month.

therefore believes that letting non-Christians participate in the play is a ministry in itself (Ray 2010). Nevertheless, belief is a crucial pre-requisite to playing a part in *The New Great Passion Play*, and the actors' reenactment of the Passion is a performance of their faith (which is the traditional understanding of ritual held by modern anthropologists).

Similarly, one cannot think of *The New Great Passion Play* without its fervent audience reception. Besides the fact that it has been watched by millions and gets 95% of approval rate from its customers according to Ray, one can attest to its popularity simply by being an audience member surrounded by a cheering and applauding crowd when the risen Jesus walks out of the tomb and after he gloriously disappears into the night sky at the end. In fact, the audience are generally very quiet throughout the show except for some intermittent noise from babies and young kids, and yet they are attentive and the atmosphere feels heavy with the sense of something serious and important going on; what Bell would call the "sense of ritual" is strongly present during the performance. Maybe, it is already present at the opening of the show when the recorded voice narrates the passage from John 20.30-31: "Jesus did many other signs not written here. But these are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and through faith you will have life in his name."

In relation to the sense of ritual, one thing that comes to one's immediate notice at the beginning of the play after the narration is the lip-sync of the cast to a pre-recorded text and background music, a continuing tradition since the play's inception. Given the acoustic limitations of the huge outdoor amphitheatre and the difficulty of keeping professional talents with a limited budget, this is a good instance which shows that the practical concern takes precedence over the artistic concern in *The New Great Passion Play*. For instance, while the

voice of Jesus is sonorous, sincere and authoritative, the lines are generally spoken slowly for enunciation and maximum audibility and I got the impression that the lines are *preached* rather than *acted* at the expense of emotion and realism. In other words, it is important that the Word be heard rather than it be realistic, as if the recorded voice of Jesus was an audio book version of the Bible. As in Christian service, the preaching of the Word seems to be an indispensable part of the Christian ritual of the Passion play, and this is probably one of the major differences between Passion ritual and postmodern theatre which will be discussed in Part II. Whereas the Scripture itself is not the most important element of the postmodern passion plays and therefore flexibility regarding its interpretation and representation is allowed, the central task of the Passion plays is to deliver the Word to the “congregation” in its intact form. And as we will see in the following chapters, this preachy nature appears as a crucial trait also in the two other Passion plays and contributes to the overall “sense of ritual” of the performances.

On the other hand, an artistic issue that the recording raises is that, while most actors’ gestures and movements are generally embodied with dignity and some degree of credibility, they are often exaggerated for long-distance visibility and timings are sometimes missed to create a “disconnect between the (putative) speaker’s body and his or her voice” as Chansky observed (125). In this respect, the play would be disappointing to those who come with the expectation that they would have on a top-notch theatrical performance with professional actors. Watching the performance as a theatre scholar most familiar with the realist theatre, I became curious if the artistic weaknesses of the acting due mainly to the constraint of the recording could ironically contribute to the play’s sense of ritual; at least, the actors appeared quite sincere in what they were doing and it was rather clear that the outcome was not “art for art’s sake.”

Especially to me who is also used to seeing tight-budget, mistakes-ridden and amateur quality church productions, the artistically imperfect aspect of the show in addition to the preachiness of the recording made it feel more like a “ritual” than a play.

The conversion stories surrounding the play also differentiate the play from the secular theatre where the audience’s spiritual transformation is not usually the ultimate goal. Ray mentioned that there are spiritual mentors on the property who deal with many people after the show every night and they have had many testimonies concerning the life-changing power of the play; according to him, there are hundreds of people who “come and profess Christ” every year because of the play. Some of them find the mentors before they leave the property and say, “Can you pray with me? This is where I met my life.” He also mentioned about a testimony from a Methodist minister who had once brought the two roughest kids in his town with his youth group. On their way back home after seeing the play, the two boys started to ask questions regarding what they had seen that night and they eventually realized that they needed to come to Jesus. The minister later told Ray, “they are now the best youth kids in my class” (Ray 2010). Although Ray acknowledges that the effect generally is not immediately visible and many conversions take place off-property, he believes that the play can change people’s lives and that their role is mainly to plant the seeds so that somebody else, usually the local priest, may reap the harvest. Following Schechner’s contextual distinction between theatre and ritual, *The New Great Passion Play* leans towards the ritual end of the spectrum for its main purpose is not simply to entertain but to effect changes in the audience. And this seems to be the goal of most audience also, not the performers only, who come seeking some spiritual inspiration, not pure entertainment.



The general seating assignment also is one of its ritual factors. Unlike most commercially-oriented theatres where more money gives a spectator a more privileged view (thereby creating class division), *The New Great Passion Play* sells all tickets for the same price (\$26.50),<sup>15</sup> and seats audiences on the first come first served basis. The general seating assignment is conducive to setting up the environment where the audience leave their everyday social order and become nameless to constitute a “*communitas*,” a group of people without social hierarchy and structure, for the duration of the performance as in a church. Although it is a temporary phenomenon, the audience turn themselves into a ritual community sharing the same belief and willingly committing themselves to this new order that the amphitheatre has to offer while they witness the biblical scenes come to life.

The namelessness of the performers also facilitates the ritual environment of *communitas*. Unlike in the professional theatre where the names of the people involved in the production are important and usually listed in the program, the Passion play provides no means of identifying the performers, designers or crew, subjugating them to the roles they play in it. Chansky’s article on North American Passion plays implies that she simply saw the unnamings as strange and unprofessional (126), but this view overlooks the significance of namelessness as a ritual factor. It does not only keep the performers out of their everyday context to hold them in the same *communitas* with the audience but also fuses the unnamed actors with the biblical characters they play for the reality effect. For the duration of the performance, they remain as the biblical figures they represent, not as the actors who are separable from their roles.

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<sup>15</sup> In the 2011 season, the regular rate for an adult was \$26.50 with \$1.75 discount on on-line purchase and children between ages 6-15 paid \$13.50 per ticket with \$1 discount on the web.

As we have seen so far, *The New Great Passion Play* is a ritualized performance event characterized by its strong “sense of ritual” marked by its differences from other quotidian activities and secular performances in various aspects including its mystique location and construction of “sacred” space, periodicity, commitment of the participants, publicity, content, goal and so on. As a result, it amounts to something different from and more than theatre; as the epithet following the title on the cover of the program says, it is “More Than Just a Play.”

More than anything else, however, the power of the Passion play comes from its highly symbolic nature and emotional content. As mentioned in the introduction, Jesus has been the most influential religious icon in contemporary American culture, and the plot of *The New Great Passion Play* is a selective rearrangement of the biblical narratives to amplify the power of the enduring American symbol which plays the main role in it. After a brief traffic of animals including a camel, horses and sheep, Roman soldiers and Israeli citizens across the playing area during the opening narration, the play begins in Martha and her sister Mary’s house where they are grieving over the death of their brother Lazarus. Here and throughout the play, background music plays an important role in setting up the tone of the scene and making the audience emotionally engaged as music is an indispensable component of a ritual experience. At the sight of Jesus, Martha complains to her master for not having arrived before his death to cure him. Jesus assures her that her brother will rise, which she understands as simply reiterating his previous teaching on the Resurrection of the Last Day. Then Jesus says to the doubting woman, “I am the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in me, even though they have died, will live” (John 11:25), and calls Lazarus out of the tomb. The non-denominational play frontloads the evangelical theology that personal belief in Jesus as the Savior is the only way to eternal life.

Ray explained that although *The New Great Passion Play*, modeled after *The Oberammergau Passion Play*, deals with the Passion week only, they added some miracles that are recorded in the Gospels but did not happen within the week, such as healing a blind man and raising a dead child, to show that Jesus was not just a man but also God. For the same reason, they added the resurrection of Jesus which happens on the eighth day since they serve “a risen Savior.” The presentation of the miracles imbues the character of Jesus with divine presence that sets him apart from other secular symbols. On the other hand, the play does not simply depict him as an authoritative, inapproachable holy object of worship but also as a sympathetic, child-loving comforter whom evangelicals would call the “Friend of Sinners” or the “Sweet Savior.” Particularly interesting in this regard is an imaginative scene in the middle of the play where one of the disciples pushes John downhill on their way to the Last Supper and others make light fun of him as all including Jesus laugh at the rather childish interaction.

During our conversation, Ray mentioned that they have theological and artistic disputes, mostly minor, with audiences all the time, and one of them was on this particular scene, since it is not found in the Bible. Nevertheless, they added the scene to show the humanity of Jesus and help the audience build a relationship with him in personal and intimate terms. Like his theological dual nature, the Jesus of the Passion play possesses both “sacred” and “common” qualities as a religious symbol.

Although Jesus is obviously the most important figure in the play, he is not the only source of its transcendental power. What was both artistically and theologically intriguing to me in the opening scene was the appearance of Satan portrayed by a pale-faced female performer dressed in black and purple. The character was added a few years ago to represent the idea that

Satan, though invisible, is a real presence in the world and to show what the Passion was really about. It is ominously present in most scenes where Jesus performs miracles including the resurrection and particularly during Judas Iscariot's betrayal narrative. The character of Satan anthropomorphizes the classical binary of Good and Evil, represented by Jesus versus Satan in the play, which has a theologically prominent place in the New Testament to suggest that the Passion is a battle fought *in* this world but not *of* this world. Along with the character of Jesus, Satan plays a significant part in taking the play beyond the natural realm.

Conflict is another crucial element that builds the dramatic tension and stimulates emotional responses. One scene depicts a meeting of the Jewish priests, who are disturbed at the report of Lazarus' resurrection by a male witness in the previous scene. In comparison to the character of Satan, the theological "other" which sets up the spiritual conflict of the narrative, the Jewish priests in white costumes symbolizing their authority and purity serve to carry the action forward in human terms. While the play never conflates the two "others," both the Satan and the Jewish authorities antagonize the Son of God to lead the play to its climax. As in the modern theatre, other-ing is one of the most notable dramatic devices used in the play to build a dramatic conflict.

Whereas Chansky observed that the Passion plays she attended including *The Great Passion Play* (which she saw in July 2003) are "episodic and generally not concerned with dramaturgical causality" (122), the plot of *The New Great Passion Play* is mostly governed by logical principles such as cause-effect and contrast, and the play is highly selective in choosing and rearranging parts of the Gospel narratives to increase their dramatic effect. The selectivity of the play plays a significant role in shaping the overall message of the show and its audience

reaction. What comes next is the anointing of Jesus by Mary (who actually remains unnamed in the Synoptics) with her perfume. Following the Gospel of John, the scene has Judas rebuke her for wasting the expensive oil on Jesus' feet and is in turn admonished by Jesus. He retorts and goes out to be tempted by Satan; the play seems to suggest that this is his motive to betray his master, while it is ultimately Satan that manipulates him.

Another day begins and the Jerusalem scene is spread before the audience. This is one of the most spectacular scenes of the play which shows animals, merchants, townspeople young and old, beggars, a blind man, and Roman soldiers on a chariot. And the details of the spectacle featuring about 100 people in period costumes are striking: people come in and out of their houses, a couple of women are seen to visit Lazarus' tomb on stage right and talk about his miraculous resurrection, some people come to the well at the stage center to get water in their jars, the marketplace is crowded with various people including children and a blind man, and there are another pair of women sitting on the roof of a building behind the marketplace reading a scroll. Then a theft — a man tries to run away with a merchant's cloth and ends up being caught by two guards — adds dynamic realism to the scene. The realism and exoticity of the set and costumes put on an outdoor panoramic perspective accompanied by sonorous music create a sense of uniqueness and historicity. And I wondered if this detailed and realistic reconstruction of everyday reality was what Stanislavski saw in the Meiningen Ensemble that deeply influenced his acting theories.

Against the backdrop of the brisk everyday life, downcast Judas enters and is informed by a Jewish guard that the priests are looking for Jesus and intend to hire a man to help them. Then Pilate appears from stage left on a chariot and is greeted only by his wife Claudia, which is

put in contrast to Jesus' triumphant entry into the city on a donkey from stage right highlighted by loud fanfares and shouts of joy. Strictly speaking, the play does not adhere to the timeline of the Passion narrative, since Jesus' purging of the Temple immediately follows it (which happens the next day in the original narrative). Then Jesus, surrounded by the cheerful crowd, performs miracles of opening the eyes of a blind man, healing a lame beggar and raising a dead child, all of which is suspiciously watched by the Jewish priests. The priests then test Jesus with some questions only to be rebuked by him as hypocrites, which leads to their conspiracy to kill Jesus, while two of the Pharisees, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, are touched by what Jesus said. The Jerusalem scene, packed with the spectacular action of a large cast, dramatically rearranged healing miracles and confrontation, is one of the most emotionally engaging parts of the entire play.

As noted earlier, *The New Great Passion Play* frequently uses contrast to heighten the significance of each scene. The building tension of the prior scene increases as the brooding Judas suddenly leaves the company to the others' bewilderment but it is immediately relieved by the aforementioned imaginative interaction between Jesus and his disciples on their way to the Last Supper. And then, the jovial mood is again pitted against the lone betrayer Judas who, led by Satan, goes to the Jewish priests and receives 30 silver coins. He then returns to the group avoiding Jesus' knowing eyes, and Jesus washes the disciples' feet and begins the Lord's Supper during which Jesus foretells Judas' betrayal and his death.

Interestingly, this important scene did not try to replicate da Vinci's painting but reflected some historical research. While its general set up was not quite different in that Jesus and the disciples sat at an oblong table facing the audience, the scene did not feature the same costumes

and colors of the painting, and a Passover seder, instead of the more common Catholic wafer, was being used. The scene is one of the examples which demonstrates that ritual is not a mechanically repeated performance bound to tradition but sometimes breaks away from the tradition to keep up with their participants' changing sense of ritual. Likewise, *The Great Passion Play* has openly adopted new technology to create better special effects, update music and, most significantly, recently changed their script from the King James Version (KJV) to the New Living Translation (NLT)<sup>16</sup> to make the language easier to understand, which unfortunately made some audience very upset. After all, not everyone has the same sense of ritual and it keeps changing.

The play then moves toward the climax through the well-known sequence: the prayer at the garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, the trial before the high priest and Pilate, Peter's denial, the flogging, *via dolorosa* and the crucifixion. The flogging scene is particularly intense and violent, and the Roman soldiers appear as mercilessly brutal and the deafening sound effects of whipping makes the audience flinch. Jesus' last breath "Father, into your hands I trust my spirit" is followed by a thunderstorm and earthquake, and the moment of his death is put in contrast to

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<sup>16</sup> American Passion plays do not use the same English translation of the Bible. The major difference among different translations is whether they are literal translations or use modernized and paraphrased language. The translations at the literal end are Revised Version (RV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), New King James Version (NKJV), New International Version (NIV), New International Reader's Version, while J.B. Phillips, Good News Bible (GNB), Contemporary English Version (CEV), New Century Version (NCV), Living Bible and New Living Translation (NLT) belong to the freer group. In the middle are New English Bible (NEB), Revised English Bible (REB), Jerusalem Bible (JB) and New Jerusalem Bible (NJB). Among these different versions, the New International Version (NIV) is most widely used in the world. For a more detailed account on different English translations of the Bible, refer to page 77 of *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible* (1999).

Judas hanging on a tree with Satan appearing to be victorious standing next to him. This scene shows where, aside from its ritualized context other dramatic factors, the power of the Passion play primarily comes from; the violent scene strongly appeals to sense and emotion rather than stimulate critical thinking. A relevant case would be Mel Gibson's contentious film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which grossed over \$370 million in the country in spite of many negative criticisms it received due to its highly graphic depiction of the Passion. Josh Sanburn of the *Time* magazine saw the film as one of the "Top 10 Ridiculously Violent Movies" ("Top 10 Ridiculously Violent Movies"), and the renowned film critic Roger Ebert, though reviewing the film in a favorable light, said: "The movie is 126 minutes long, and I would guess that at least 100 of those minutes, maybe more, are concerned specifically and graphically with the details of the torture and death of Jesus. This is the most violent film I have ever seen" ("The Passion of the Christ"). Even though the violence of Gibson's film is said to have been repulsive to many viewers, there is no doubt that it was a vital factor of its emotional appeal and commercial success, since that is what constitutes the major part of the film and millions of people paid to endure the two hours' strong sensual attack. While the whipping and crucifixion of Jesus in *The New Great Passion Play* is theatrically stylized and shown at a distance (and therefore less disturbing than the film), it still communicates the physical pain inflicted on Jesus effectively. And suffering right in front of the overwhelmed audience is the supreme American symbol Jesus Christ, the Son of God who is being innocently punished for the sins of their own. The doctrine of Atonement endows the sacrifice of Jesus with a deep spiritual meaning to make it more than an innocent death. And yet, this is not the end of the story.



The Jewish priests have a debate about the thunderstorm and earthquake and the torn Temple curtain which happened at Jesus' death. And after Jesus' body is moved into the tomb, they order to seal the entrance. That night, an angel with a sword appears on the tomb and the stone is rolled aside to reveal the risen Jesus in his glory, accompanied by a narration and a loud fanfare, and Satan flees at the sight of the light from the tomb. It seems that the play uses spectacles and sound effects in proportion to the theological significance of each scene; the more important a scene is, the more spectacular and the louder it is. As Meg Twycross observed of the medieval theatre, spectacle plays "a vital role" in the Passion play to act "as a metaphor for divine power and glory" (38). And this is the relationship between the theatrical spectacle and the contemporary reality Geertz noticed in the theatre state of Bali. The dazzling special effects do not only engage the senses but also amplify the authority of the scene and create the reality effect, arguing for the truth of what is being shown. The women arrive at the empty tomb to be told by the angel that Jesus is resurrected as foretold. Jesus, the women and the disciples have a moving reunion scene and the play ends with the Ascension, which is achieved by invisible wires lifting Jesus against the backdrop of the night sky, with his last word, "Remember, I am always with you even to the very end of this world."

As we have seen so far, *The New Great Passion Play* provides an unusual performance experience for the audience with its ritualized context and its emotional content based on rich symbolism and aided by background music and spectacular effects. As a result, the play becomes a powerful Christian ritual where the audience can feel the divine presence and the group solidarity of the believing community is reaffirmed.

## **The New Great Passion Play and the Politics**

As mentioned in the introduction, Geertz and Kertzer hold that ritual is a powerful medium for politics due to its symbolic construction of reality backed up by “myth” and the emotional engagement it facilitates. Whether one is a believer or a skeptic, and whether one cares about *The New Great Passion Play* or not, what is obviously true is that it is a powerful attraction for many people. And as we have seen above, the power comes from many factors but what is most essential is its symbolic construction of reality. Relying on the power of the biblical symbols and the moving narrative, the play provides a framework for the audience to make sense of the world and their individual lives and clothe them with a grand meaning—especially that their “sins” are forgiven and their suffering during their earthly pilgrimage is not meaningless. In addition, as many anthropologists including Durkheim have observed of ritual in general, the play also functions to achieve social harmony within the community by solidifying their belief.

While the Passion play never professes or associates itself with certain politics or denominations, Geertz’ and Kertzer’s critique of ritual as essentially political sheds some light on the play’s connection to local politics aside from its spiritual and social impact. In light of its symbolic status in the Midwest, the play itself is a statement of power; producing a big-scale spectacle with a cast of over two hundred, as in Geertz’ Bali, clearly shows who constitute the most powerful religious group in the region, considering that there is no other contender in terms of religious spectacle. And its significance is not simply that the show advocates a certain religious view point but that its religious identity seems to be conflated with a certain racial identity. Ray said that the play, claiming to be a historically accurate reconstruction of the Passion, has featured some non-white actors for minor roles, emphasizing that they do not

discriminate. According to him, they now have several non-white casts including several Asian-descent people, a couple of Hispanics, a German family and Romanians. While the play's openness to diverse people may be laudable, all performances I viewed on September 19, 2009, August 28, 2010, and September 3, 2011, featured predominantly white casts and there did not seem to be much racial diversity. Almost all of the actors were recognizably white, and even if there were, among the approximately two hundred fifty actors, some non-Anglo-Saxon actors in minor roles that I might have failed to notice, the major characters such as Jesus and the disciples were all portrayed by white performers in Jewish costumes. As a result, the major group represented by *The New Great Passion Play* is not simply Christian but "white" Christian.

This is by no means to contend that *The New Great Passion Play* has any motif of racial favoritism or discrimination. The staff at the parking lot, the gift shops, the box office and the main office including Ray were all welcoming and amiable, and the play's fame has never been blemished by any issues related to racial discrimination but instead enjoyed the support of diverse audiences including African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians. And considering the small multiracial pool of actors and their minimal population in Eureka Springs—as Ray admitted that they do not have a large percent of non-white people wanting to come to the city, the absence (or lack) of non-white actors would be far from intended.

However, what popped up during my conversation with Ray indicates that there might be other causes for the predominance of white actors in the production. When asked about the casting process and the racial composition of the cast, he said that, even though they would be happy to have a multiracial cast, they would not cast an African-American as Jesus for it would be historically inaccurate; "It's hard for you to have an African-American Jesus because Jesus

was a Jew. He wouldn't have been African-American. The same thing is Pilate could not be an Asian." He continued, "we try to stereotype those people in the cast members so they look like the part, and that's just the way a play would be" (Ray 2010). While I could agree with the idea that historical accuracy matters, there was something discomfoting about the rationale. If casting decisions are made in terms of historical accuracy, shouldn't all actors be Jewish? But the fact is that they do not have any Jewish actors, at least the way the Jews looked in biblical times (and of course, not to speak of being Jewish in religious terms).

It seems that Ray's notion of historical accuracy has more to do with the history of the western art that dominated popular imagination than the history in the scientific sense, and is therefore a socio-cultural product rather than an objective and informed view. And the image of Jesus presented at the amphitheatre is only one of the countless fictions of him as briefly reviewed in the introduction. The proliferation of different conceptions of Jesus in the contemporary American culture indicates that there is no consensus on the image of Jesus and there never will be. As we have seen above, there will always be people disputing on the representation of Jesus saying "that's not the Jesus I know" no matter how he is represented, since representation presupposes containing what is dynamic and multifaceted into a static, artificial and recognizable form by privileging a certain point of view. Therefore, the real issue with the white Jesus in the play is not so much that it is historically inaccurate but that *an* image of Jesus, of all the different versions, has somehow become *the* image of Jesus. And the same thing can be said of other major characters such as the disciples and the women followers who are also taken up by white actors. The question to ask is whether the dominance of white actors

in the play, not only in terms of the number of characters but also in terms of their importance, has become normative.

In discussing ritual as an art of the body in Foucauldian context, Bell observes how ritualization produces the “ritualized body” by temporarily setting up a schematized environment and employing the social body to create order and hierarchy.

[T]hrough a series of physical movements ritual practices spatially and temporally construct an environment organized according to schemes of privileged opposition. The construction of this environment and the activities within it simultaneously work to impress these schemes upon the bodies of participants. This is a circular process that tends to be misrecognized, if it is perceived at all, as values and experiences impressed upon the person and community from sources of power and order beyond it. Through the orchestration in time of loose but strategically organized oppositions, in which a few oppositions quietly come to dominate others, the social body internalizes the principles of the environment being delineated. Inscribed within the social body, these principles enable the ritualized person to generate in turn strategic schemes that can appropriate or dominate other sociocultural situations. (*Ritual Theory* 98-99)

As a play of difference, ritualization can empower or disempower the ritualized body by creating contrasts, opposition (i.e. the “others”) and hierarchy between the ritual agents in its peculiar environment. This happens through the interaction of the social body as text and the invocation of the power beyond the participants achieved by the ritualized structuring of the space. Whereas

Kertzer holds the view that political figures intentionally employ ritual strategies to bolster their authority, Bell sees the production of the ritualized body as a rather unconscious, corollary effect, what ritualization does not see itself doing. In case of *The New Great Passion Play*, Bell's view seems to make more sense. As a ritualized performance, the play also produces of a world of hierarchy and opposition (i.e. Jesus' authority over the disciples and his conflict with the Roman and Jewish authorities) with the goal of providing inspiration and entertainment for the visitors and spiritual harvests (i.e. conversions). What the play does not see itself doing is that the schemes projected on the ritualized body of the performers can be appropriated to affect other sociocultural situations outside the ritualized environment. Geertz makes a similar observation of the confluence between the world here and now and the world beyond during a ritual when he says, "in a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world" (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 112).

From a defamiliarizing point of view, the Passion play seems to reaffirm the old racial hierarchy with a white master figure and non-white followers by following the old logic of the social body according to which a minority cannot be an authority figure—a point we will come back to when we discuss Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000*. And the audience could be unconsciously made receptive to the structure backed up by the transcendental power of the sacred narrative. This is more than a spiritual matter, since its impact on the politics (i.e. elections) in the region could not be overlooked where people are unaccustomed to seeing their "Lord" portrayed by an actor other than white. There is a relevant anecdote recorded in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (1977) about a post-Civil War ex-slave who

rejected the idea of the black Jesus on the following grounds; “How can we believe it; the Lord must be white, because I never saw any other kind of people rise and redeem. If de Lord was a big black man, white people would sure haf to run from him. I for one would run from him” (qtd. in Rawick 281). The example, although quite dated, still sheds some light on the impact of representation and experience on one’s construction of self and others. If Ray’s assessment that about 40% of their audience now are African-Americans and about 10,000 Koreans a year come to see the play is true, the fact that there has been no notable dispute over the historical inaccuracy of the play with regard to the representation of Jesus and disciples indicates that we somehow have come to take it for granted.

The extreme case of the white normativity of Jesus can be found in the history of the Mormons who “have always imagined Jesus as a white man” (Prothero 196). For 130 years between 1848 and 1978, all presidents and apostles of the Mormon Church are said to have taught what is known as the Mormon “Negro” Doctrines, according to which God is a white man who created Adam in His own image, and Cain, who was originally white like his father, became the first “Negro” due to God’s punishment for his murder of his brother Abel. Therefore, blackness is a sign of the curse, and the “Mark of Cain” will be removed from blacks, who are Cain’s descendants, after the Millennium, a thousand years’ reign of Christ after the Second Coming. It was only in 1978 that this racial prejudice stopped being part of the official doctrine of the Mormon Church and blacks were finally ordained as priests. Although this deeply troubling myth is not shared by the mainstream Christian denominations today, the case shows why it is important to break away from the stereotype, especially in the American context where one’s skin color was once thought to be a mark of superiority/inferiority and the “Whiteness of

God and Jesus is the major barrier to [blacks'] experiencing Christianity as a force which liberates and humanizes rather than oppresses, exploits and dehumanizes" (Salley and Behm 14).

In *Black Looks: race and representation* (1992), American feminist author and activist bell hook points out that "a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory" (2). She believes that the first step to black political resistance is "loving blackness," which "transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (20), maintaining that "the field of representation," which has been dominated by whites, "remains a place struggle" in this regard (3). Although hooks sees film as the most influential cultural medium today, her point seems quite relevant to Passion plays as well, especially that we "must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self-determination" (4). In the absence of similar African-American spectacles such as Willa Saunders Jones' Passion play in the country, the white normativity of Jesus and Passion plays in general should alert us, and we need to make efforts to encourage the minority in the country to imagine Jesus as other than white and more like themselves so that they can also believe that they are "made in His image." In this respect, rhetorics relying on the notion of "historical accuracy" such as "Jesus was not black" seems to be an unnecessary stumbling block for racial equality.

Another socio-political issue that the Passion play has raised concerning the ritualized body is its treatment of the Jews. As discussed above, the Jewish authorities appear to be in



conflict with Jesus in the play, and the scheme of opposition can be “misrecognized” as legitimizing the mistreatment of Jews in general. Gerald L. K. Smith, the founder of *The New Great Passion Play*, is now in fact remembered as one of the most anti-Semitic political activists of his time, although his view of Jews, along with that of another nationally known anti-Semite Gordon Winrod who also settled in the Ozarks, “had very little influence on the region’s people” (Rafferty 68). Starting his career as a preacher, he later became a devoted associate of Huey Long and used his renowned oratorical skills for Christian and populist causes leading the Share Our Wealth movement and Christian Nationalist Crusade in the mid-twentieth century. In the context of the war with the Nazis and the Great Depression that prompted anti-Jewish sentiments among some influential figures such as Henry Ford (1863–1947) and Father Charles Edward Coughlin (1891–1979) in the United States, Smith became obsessed with the idea of “Jewish Conspiracy” and actively opposed what he believed was pro-Zionist politics.

In *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (2002), Shawn Kelly traces the origin of anti-Semitism in modern biblical scholarship. He concurs with Omi and Winant’s view that the racism against blacks and Jews in modern Christianity was a product of European modernity. He writes: “modern acts of racial exclusion and violence were constituent with the fundamental principles and beliefs of modernity and were an essential outgrowth of modernity. It was during the modern era that racism was transformed from a common prejudice into an authoritative ideology, and even into scientific knowledge” (25). According to Kelly, the ideas of German philosophers such as Hegel and Heidegger were rooted in this modern way of thinking and were later developed into the racist discourse of the Nazi in their search for the essence and authenticity of the German people (*Volk*). The Hegelian

philosophy was in turn inherited by the Tübingen school represented by theologians Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) and finally arrived in America in the 1960s to influence American biblical scholarship.

Kelly's genealogical research shows that Smith's anti-Semitic view did not come out of a vacuum but was rooted in the socio-political discourse of the time. Like other essentialist views on race, gender and sexuality, anti-Semitism was an outgrowth of the racial prejudice deeply-rooted in modernity. As Chansky noted, Smith's name today is honored nowhere in the program, the website or advertising material of *The New Great Passion Play*, which implies that the foundation is not quite proud of his political legacy. The only place where his name can be found is the Smith couple's tombstone lying near the Christ statue on the Passion play campus. On the other hand, it seems that the consciousness of Smith's misguided conviction ironically contributed to the improvement that the play has made so far, since the play's interpretation of the Jews seemed to be more careful than the other Passion plays.

In *The Oberammergau Passion Play: A Lance against Civilization*, Saul Friedman enumerates the guidelines for revising the German Passion play suggested by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in America between 1968 and 1970. Several suggestions were made but the main ones are: more emphasis on Jesus' Jewishness, less stereotyping of the Jews and less sympathetic portrayal of Pilate who is believed to have been a merciless executioner of many innocent people (47-48). In light of the guidelines, one can notice *The New Great Passion Play*'s conscious efforts to get rid of controversial hate factors, although not all of the above suggestions are literally observed. The most obvious one is the elimination of the blood curse "His blood is on us and on our children!" (New International

Version, Matthew 27.25)<sup>17</sup> and stereotypes. What is noteworthy in this regard is the representation of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathae who are presented as discrete, open-minded Pharisees who take Jesus' miracles rather seriously. With the moderate portrayal of the other Jewish priests as well, the play at least seems to avoid giving the impression that all Jews were irritable, greedy and blood-thirsty bigots. And the most dislikable figures in the play are the Roman soldiers whose brutality in handling, whipping and crucifying Jesus leaves no room for sympathy. Also, it could be argued that the introduction of Satan into the play is another factor that significantly reduces the role of the Jewish authorities in crucifying Jesus, while the counter-argument would be that it is associating the devil with the Jews as in the Medieval times (the second chapter will expand on this point in relation to the stereotypical representation of the Pharisees in *The Promise*). In light of the definition of anti-Semitism by the online Meriam-Webster dictionary—"hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group," I, as an audience member, was uncertain that the play would make the audience leave angry believing that Jews are to blame for Jesus' death, unless that is their deep-held assumption before watching the play performed in the Ozarks where "[i]n general the Jewish community has encountered relatively few incidents of discrimination or anti-Semitic sympathy" (Rafferty 68).

In fact, the heated debate over the anti-Semitic nature of Passion plays in general has more to do with the selectivity of their representation of the Passion than the Christian Gospel

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<sup>17</sup> Some of the biblical quotations in the dissertation are the transcripts of the actual lines spoken by the actors, and they do not strictly or consistently follow a particular version. These direct quotations from the plays will be indicated with a "*cf.*" before the name of the book, as in "(*cf.* John 3:16)."

itself. It is often forgotten or ignored that the Good News is essentially “Jewish” not to speak of the fact that Jesus and the early apostles were Jewish. One concrete example is the story of a Gentile woman who begs Jesus to cure her daughter (Matthew 15.21-28; Mark 7.24-30) which never gets represented in any of the Passion plays I have ever seen. To the surprise of the poor Gentile woman who came to ask for her daughter’s freedom from a demon severely tormenting her, Jesus does not show any compassion or immediately grant her wish but rather bluntly rejects her request saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 15.24); both in Matthew and Mark, Jesus compares Israelites to God’s beloved sons and Gentiles to dogs which do not deserve food on the master’s table. If this passage was presented to the American Gentile audience who strongly believe that Jews are no longer God’s chosen people but the descendants of the New England Pilgrims have replaced the role in their stead, how disturbing it would be! A careful examination of the Bible gives one little ground to neglect or despise Jews, and the problem with most Passion plays is that they seem to define their Christian identity primarily *against* the Jews when the conflict of the Passion was “not a battle of Jews against Jesus but a battle of God against Satan” as the best-selling author Max Lucado puts it (92). There will be further discussion on the issue of anti-Semitism in chapters 2 and 4. Suffice it to say for now that *The New Great Passion Play* has been making some progress (hopefully they will continue to) and what would complement the makers’ effort is the spectator’s awareness of the issue and examining their assumptions. According to the orthodox Christian belief, the death of Jesus was preordained by the Father to “take away the sin of the world” and therefore it was not a historical act perpetrated by human hand. Also, Jesus, as William J. Gaither’s widely-sung *Because He Lives* says, came to “love, heal and forgive,” not to teach us to hate, hurt and revenge. *The New*

*Great Passion Play* reminds us of this when Jesus dying on the cross says, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.”

History has taught us that power leads to abuse and oppression, and Passion plays are not an exception. *The New Great Passion Play* would eventually become a political ritual when its primary function is to serve the majority by upholding the status quo and the socially constructed norm without concern for the minority; a metanarrative with a legitimizing function in Lyotardian terms. With the advent of postmodernism, the play is in need of increased awareness of socio-cultural changes and self-reflexivity as to what would result from its symbolic representation. As we have seen in this chapter, the representation of Jesus and the Passion narrative, like any other type of mimesis, is not a pure and innocent practice but a product of the socio-cultural discourse that favors certain points of view and values. The casting and portrayal of biblical figures and the selectivity and rearrangement of the Gospel narrative are part of the discursive practice reflecting the ways in which people conceive of the symbols, interpret and communicate their meaning. The Passion plays is a site where the sometimes invisible assumptions and values of the discourse are materialized on stage and sacralized in its unique ritual setting. It is for this reason that the performance is a very useful and important venue to examine, reevaluate and even challenge these values. By making conscious efforts to reevaluate and change them, a Passion play can make real changes in the outside world. In the following chapters, we will see how the Passion/passion plays collectively serve as an index of these efforts.

## Chapter 2. Re-Membering the Promise: *The Promise* in Glen Rose, TX

In this chapter, we will be looking at *The Promise*, “a musical experience of the life of Christ,” performed every summer at the Texas Amphitheater in Glen Rose since 1989. As in the previous chapter, the history of Glen Rose and the play is first introduced and then the analysis of the performances that I saw on September 11, 2010, and September 3, 2011, follows. Here, I discuss its formal similarities to and differences from *The New Great Passion Play*, how the play ritualizes itself and what political issues the performance raises. By theatrical standards, the play seems to be the most polished among the three Passion plays covered in Part I. It features professional talents in acting, design<sup>18</sup> and directing, and one of the most notable differences from the Eureka Springs play is that all lines and songs are spoken and sung live. Despite its strong theatrical dimension, the play can also be identified as a ritual with its pre-show that frames the performance as a ritual, the brightly-colored costumes and dazzling special effects that heighten the sensual dimensions of the biblical symbols, and the use of contemporary Christian music (CCM) that intensifies the emotional quality of the story. Other prominent ritual elements are the show’s efforts to establish the credibility of the Gospel narrative it depicts, which include three modern characters’ interaction with biblical figures and the audience, as well as the use of crowds to invoke the historicity of witnessing. The detailed analysis of the play’s ritual strategies demonstrates that the Passion ritual strives to achieve the reality effect by fusing the world of the stage and the spectator’s reality through various theatrical/ritualistic means. This

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<sup>18</sup> The Texas Amphitheater and the set were designed by Broadway designer Peter Wolf, and the first costumes were created by the famous costume designer Irene Corey.

is the reason one should be careful participating in a ritual performance, since what is represented becomes “real” in that particular context. It is with this awareness of the reality effect that we will look at the play’s representation of the Passion below. Building on the critical analysis of the previous chapter, this chapter will pay particular attention to the show’s handling of the Jewish religious leaders in the discussion of the politics of the play. By discussing the show’s ritual strategies and political issues, I will show first, the variety of means, mostly theatrical and different from those of *The New Great Passion Play*, that are used in the musical for its ritual ends, and second, why the dramatic device of other-ing based on differences should be avoided in a ritualized setting. As Kelly pointed out, anti-Semitism surrounding the Passion was socio-politically developed out of the desire to differentiate oneself from the “others,” and this essentialist and schismatic discourse should be challenged in contemporary representations of the Passion. Otherwise, a Passion play can degenerate into a tool of domination and oppression, as was the case with *The Oberammergau Passion Play* during the Third Reich.

### **The Past and Present of Glen Rose and *The Promise***

The Texas Amphitheater where *The Promise* has been performed for 23 years is located at a hilltop in Glen Rose, a town 60 miles southwest of Fort Worth, Texas, with a population of 2,444 according to the 2010 census. The area around what is now Glen Rose was first settled by Charles Barnard in 1849 as a trading post. In 1860, he and Herman Quimbly built a flour and grist mill on the ground of the present town square along the Paluxy River in return for the title to a section of the land from the Milam county officials, and Barnard sold the mill to Major T. C.

Jordan of Dallas in 1871 for \$65,000. Mrs. Jordan, a native of Scotland, was “captivated by the surroundings of huge, lush trees, beautiful flowing twin springs and an abundance of wild roses and ferns” and chose to call the place "Rose Glen" — *glen* being a word of Scottish origin meaning a long and deep valley. It was finally named "Glen Rose" by the citizens' vote at a town meeting in 1872 and became the county seat in 1875 when Somervell County was formed (“Glen Rose History”). While Glen Rose was “primarily a farming community” with cotton as its major product, it was also well-known for the county’s countless natural springs and flowing wells which were believed to have healing powers and attracted “a number of doctors, magnetic healers, faith healers and a few quacks.” Ironically, the abundance of water and natural springs tempted the local citizens to make illegal liquor and the county became the “Moonshine Capital of Texas” during the Prohibition era. In 1932, some of the best preserved dinosaur tracks in the world were discovered in the Paluxy River bed and Dinosaur Valley State Park was built in 1968. A “sleepy Texas town” until the 1970’s, Glen Rose saw a tremendous growth due to the construction of the Comanche Peak Power Plant begun in 1974 and now attracts visitors and tourists to its natural resources: Dinosaur Valley State Park, Creation Evidence Museum and the Passion play (Somervell County Historical Commission and Glen Rose Convention & Visitors Bureau).

*The Promise: A Pageant on the Life of Jesus Christ* (published in 1989 by Word Music) traces its origin back to Keith Owens of Mineral Wells, TX, and the twelve men he brought together in 1984 to present an outdoor Passion play called *Worthy is the Lamb*, written by J. T. Adams as an Easter cantata, in Granbury on Comanche Peak. They had monthly meetings and donated money to launch Kingdom Development Co. to fund the project, but the difficulty to



acquire a land contract on Comanche Peak delayed the process until their contract with the playwright expired. In the meantime, Adams found another home for his play in Jacksonville, North Carolina, where it was first produced by the Crystal Coast Theater in 1988 and continued until 2002. Giving up on the Granbury project, the Kingdom Development instead opted to purchase the land on which the Texas Amphitheater now stands, and the construction of the amphitheatre and the development of a new script soon began—Jan Dargatz, an internationally recognized publisher of Christian books and music, was commissioned to write the book in conjunction with Word Music, Co. In spite of the financial problems that haunted the project since the beginning, *The Promise* finally opened in October of 1989 for a single month. Having had a “moderate success” in the first season, the play had its first international tour, funded by the individuals participating, in the Palace of Congress inside the Kremlin Wall in Moscow, Russia, in 1991 “in the midst of an upheaval of the Communist Government.” It was the first Christian play ever performed at the venue, and the play returned there to offer 10 more performances three years later. In 1996, an indoor version of *The Promise* opened in Branson, Missouri, to run for six years receiving the award for the Best Show in Branson, and the number of audience at Glen Rose peaked in 1997 when more than 60,000 visitors attended the show. The show had its second international tour in 2004 to perform four times at the Olympic Soccer Stadium in Seoul, South Korea, for the “tens of thousands” of Koreans viewing each performance (“A Brief History of *The Promise* in Glen Rose”).

*The Promise*, having begun in 1989 as the youngest Passion play of the three in this study, is different from *The New Great Passion Play* in many ways. First of all, it is a musical featuring popular contemporary Christian music (CCM) whereas the latter is a straight play in which

nobody sings. Travis Tyre, the director of the play since 2006, said that the play can be structurally compared to a cantata in which the cycle of narrative and a song is repeated, and he likes it for the most powerful representations of the Passion to him are those that “incorporate music.” According to him, “the Passion of Christ is so profound, so moving and so emotional that music can take you to places where the dialogue often cannot” (Tyre 2010). Secondly, the production has the closest affinity with the secular professional theatre in terms of style and quality, being led by a director who has rich experience in professional theatre and first approaches the play as art rather than ministry. During our conversation, Tyre emphasized that “*The Promise* maintains a very high theatrical, artistic standard” (Tyre 2010). All lines and songs are spoken and sung live by the microphoned cast, all of whom, except for some volunteers playing non-speaking parts, are paid,<sup>19</sup> and *The Promise* is also the only Passion play that credits the artists and the crew involved in the production in the program; an indication that their services are recognized as professional “work” rather than pure ministry. Overall, the show, as Chansky noted, has “the most sophisticated production values” among the three Passion plays (132). Thirdly, it is not only the most expensive Passion play in the Midwest but also the only one which has seating division with the ticket price variations of \$40 (the central VIP section), \$35 (two frontal sections on both sides of the former), \$32 (three central sections in the back), \$27 (two frontal side sections at the farthest left and right of the house) and \$22 (general admission for the two most peripheral sections in the back) depending on the proximity to the

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<sup>19</sup> According to Tyre, almost all actors in the show make at least \$35 per performance, the highest pay being \$300.

stage.<sup>20</sup> In conjunction with the recognition of the performers and the crew as professional artists, the seating assignment makes the play feel less ritualistic than *The New Great Passion Play* and more contiguous with the professional theatre. Finally, it is unique in being the most comprehensive Passion play which presents the whole life of Jesus including the Nativity and the boyhood whereas people only see Jesus' public ministry and the Passion in Eureka Springs and Disney.

The Texas Amphitheater, a 3,200-seating outdoor venue as the "largest permanent outdoor stage" in the state, is a solitary magnificent building standing on a hilltop. The location of the amphitheater seems to have the same theological significance as that of the Great Passion Play Amphitheater sitting on the Mount Oberammergau, turning the visitors into the pilgrims to the Sermon on the Mount. Compared to the gigantic and tourist-friendly Great Passion Play campus, however, the complex felt small and simply organized, with a couple of administrative buildings, including the ticket booth and the concession, surrounding the amphitheatre. Inside the complex past the iron-gate entrances, there are two small tents standing behind the seating area; one is the gift shop selling souvenirs including t-shirts, fans, and the 2010 production DVD, and the other is the prayer tent. Unlike the wide-spread panoramic set of *The New Great Passion Play* which makes scene change unnecessary, the Texas Amphitheater has a conventional proscenium stage where scene flats move in and out on tracks by the manpower of the backstage crew, and a carousel located at the center is also used for scene change. Two unique features of the stage are the water-filled moat, used as the Paluxy River, the Jordan River and the Sea of

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<sup>20</sup> There was a general increase in ticket prices between the 2010 and 2011 seasons. For instance, the VIP section ticket price was \$35 until 2010 but rose up to \$40 in the 2011 season and other sections except for the most peripheral sections saw some increase.

Galilee in the play, and the rain curtain, which makes the rainstorm effect possible. Even with the existence of the moat in front of the stage, the audience can enjoy a more intimate performance experience than in the Great Passion Play Amphitheater; sitting in the VIP section, I was only about 30 feet away from the performers and felt that I was more part of the play.

Situating the play in the previous discussion of ritualization as differentiation creates an interesting contrast with the Eureka Springs play. In response to my question about the audition process, Tyre mentioned that he was always amazed that “so many new people want to be part of this,” but what they first hear at the audition is his warning that “This is not your grandfather’s Passion play.” Unlike in a pure ministry setting, people can be “rejected” for their lack of artistic sensibility since he holds the view that the play is both ministry and art so they should not be interested in only one of them. Not wanting to “close off artists,” he refused to follow the convention of asking the actors to fill out a form that asks about their faith and cast anyone who had required skills regardless. I got the impression that he wanted to differentiate the show not so much from the secular theatre as from other amateur religious performances. As a relevant anecdote, he shared with me his frustration with a church drama teacher who had once invited him to play the main role in their large cast show and embarrassed him for not knowing her stage directions such as “stage zero” and “stage west.” He seemed to be skeptical of many ongoing creative endeavors in local churches and amateur theatre organizations that were behind and out of touch with the professional world, since he believes that “if the art is unclean, that it does not achieve a certain standard or strive for the standard, then the message cannot get through.” Comparing the play to a vessel, he said that his number one principle was “the vessel (i.e. artistic sensibility and talent) must be clean.” And it is only when the vessel is “clean” that they talk

about the ministry since “once the artistic vessel is clean, the ministry is gonna work out just fine” (Tyre 2010). He also differentiated himself as being one of the only two directors of *The Promise* who had strong theatrical backgrounds, the other being Mike Meece, the first director and his mentor. Therefore, “differentiation” takes on a different meaning in Glen Rose. If *The New Great Passion Play* basically tries to differentiate itself from the ordinary and secular, *The Promise* seems to go in the opposite direction trying to catch up with the high artistic standards of the professional theatre even though they have the same religious content.

An ordained Baptist minister, writer, director and actor, Tyre studied theatre for one year at NYU, which he left for family-related issues, and earned a BFA from Dallas Baptist University. He worked with New York Shakespeare Conservatory and attended a couple of workshops of Stella Adler, whose directing and acting approach he now associates with. His professional theatre credits include: writing and directing the Off-Broadway production of *The Divine Romance*, a one-man show about the lives of America’s first foreign missionary Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) and his wife in Burma, playing Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* and Richard in *Richard III* for New York's National Shakespeare Company; producing the national tour of the one-man show *The Prisoner*, about the life of Paul the Apostle; directing *According to Luke: The Christmas Story*, *The Music Man*, *Two by Two*, *The Elephant Man*, and “numerous stage productions in churches around the country.” Identifying his “first love” as writing, he won the prestigious Bonderman Playwriting Symposium hosted by Purdue University in 1993 and authored ArtCan Drama books ([artcandrama.com](http://artcandrama.com)) for churches and private schools. As a documentary scriptwriter, his award-winning work has been seen on The Discovery Channel,

PBS, and NBC (“About the 2011 Director –Travis Tyre”). In Glen Rose, he was the first actor to play Satan and later called back to direct the musical in 2006.

I later learned that Tyre’s art-oriented approach to the play was not exclusively driven by his stage background. When asked about the financial aspect of the show, he freely admitted that it had become “a real liability” after 17 years of production until he joined *The Promise* as director; “the first year black [making money], red [losing money] all the way until 2006.” He speculated that many people came in the first year when the show just opened because they were mostly curious, and then they soon began to lose interest in what he thought was a three-hour-long “monotonous collection of scenes from the New Testament, not the life and words, and approachability of Jesus.” In order to make it “watchable” again, he cut more than a few songs and stripped away “extraneous scenes” to make it only about two hour long with a 65-minute Act One and a 52-minute Act Two. According to Tyre, the producers also did a “brilliant job” by cutting the season in half to return to black since 2006. What used to run from June to October is now only performed in September and October, “the two most historically well-attended months” at the Texas Amphitheater (Tyre 2010). The shortened season did not only cut the payroll in half but also, Tyre suggested, worked to alert the potential slumbering audience members who kept postponing their visits and eventually missed the show. As a result, they have seen a considerable increase in the audience number including the 2010 season in spite of the economic crisis that hit the tourism and entertainment industry in the country hard,<sup>21</sup> while the cast, with a little exaggeration, had sometimes outnumbered the audiences during the first five

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<sup>21</sup> Regarding the 2010 season, Tyre said that the audience number was in the range of their best years, having “1,500 - 2,000, occasionally 2,200” attending each performance (Tyre 2011).

seasons when Tyre played Satan. Granting that it is obvious from the tenacious performance history of *The Promise* in spite of the financial difficulty that the producers' motivation lies above financial return, the 16 years' financial difficulty seems to have forced them to slightly adjust their notion of efficacy. Through the difficult years, they have learned that the name of Jesus and religious content alone are not attractive enough to bring people in and sell tickets. And their financial concern shows that even a ministry like the Passion play cannot ignore the "business" aspect, as a church cannot be sustained without the offerings from the congregation.

One of the big questions I asked Tyre was why they were doing what they were doing the way they were doing it. The point of *The Promise*, according to him, was "to bring contemporary audiences into the Bible story." To that end, they use every possible means including music and technology that they can incorporate into the show, as Tyre believes that "to make the Passion experience powerful for today's audiences requires some technology, some mechanical effects, and some technological and stage effects that artistically come together." Another thing that he mentioned as unique to the play was its presentation of a "smiling, approachable Jesus, not a man of sorrow" (Tyre 2010). Truly, Jesus in *The Promise* is interpreted by a 27-year-old handsome actor of a medium height as a soft, passionate young man who smiles often and acts friendly to his disciples and others. Like other theatrical means aforementioned, it is meant to bring the character of Jesus closer to the audience. Tyre's remarks clearly show that the play is an efficacy-oriented performance and, therefore, a ritual, and it is a peculiar ritual since its theatrical quality is regarded as the most important factor in achieving the goal.

In addition to music and technology, the play uses another interesting, though not quite novel, theatrical device in trying to relate the story to the contemporary audience: the

introduction of modern characters Grandpa, Lisa and Billy as the narrator/commentator of and within the play similar to the Greek chorus. Grandpa provides exposition and fills any missing information between scenes that might confound the audience who are new to the story, and Lisa and Billy occasionally comment on the action and sometimes even interact with stage personae. The characters serve as a ritual medium for the fusion between the world of the audience in the local setting and the biblical world so as to lend more credibility and relatability to the story.

The ritual dimension of the play becomes clearer when we look at the entire performance sequence including the pre-show and the post-play. When I visited the amphitheatre for the second time on September 3, 2011, the pre-show featured Erica Lane, a Christian singer-songwriter who has released two independent albums and starred in a reality TV series called *Inspired Ambition*. On the stage where the star-spangled banner stood at the center right behind her, she warmed up the amphitheatre by singing a couple of well-known gospel songs including C. G. Boverg's *How Great Thou Art* and Keith Green's *The Easter Song*. The last song she sang was a patriotic song about America and the nation's history she wrote called *River Road*. And then Randy Mac, a Christian entertainer playing Grandpa in the show, took the mic as the master of the ceremony to welcome visiting church groups and recognize the county officials invited that night. Turning around to see them, I was amazed with the diversity of the audience; although whites were the major racial group, there were a considerable number of African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians. After introducing the director of the show, he called a cast member upon the stage to lead the singing of the national anthem with all people standing and closed the pre-show with a prayer. With the presence of the national flag on the stage center, the singing of the national anthem and its closing with the prayer, the pre-show functioned to frame the play as a



ritual, an extraordinary performance event invoking God's blessing, faith and patriotism and suggesting that faith in God and the love for the country may not be two separate things. The pre-show serves as a good example illustrating how symbols and emotional devices (such as music) are used in a ritual to have impact on the political reality.

### **The Public Ritual of Re-Membering "The Promise"**

Marked as different from other ordinary theatrical performances by the pre-show, the play continues employing symbols in a highly emotional narrative to conflate the biblical world and the contemporary reality. *The Promise* begins as the three modern characters, Grandpa, Lisa and Billy, try to find dinosaur tracks along the Paluxy river banks, a local reference to evoke a sense of "thereness" for the audience. As they gather around a campfire, Grandpa, with a Texas accent, tells his grandchildren a story about God's Promised One that his grandfather told him a long time ago. As he sings "A Promise is a Promise" (music & lyrics by Walt Harrah), the four prophets, Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23.5-6), Isaiah (Isaiah 7.14-15), Micah (Micah 5.2-4) and Zechariah (Zechariah 9.9-10), join him proclaiming messianic prophecies towards the end of the song. In the ritual context, this is a very significant moment since the prophets' breaking into the contemporary reality on stage completes the fusion between three different worlds; the moment bridges the already established link between the world of the stage (i.e. the modern characters) and the world of the audience by the local reference with the biblical world. As a result, the biblical world presented on stage is not simply a mimesis of what happened about two thousand years ago but becomes the immediate *reality* to the audience.

This fusion is continuously reaffirmed throughout the play. As soon as Grandpa explains to the children that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and his parents were instructed by an angel to go to Bethlehem, Mary, escorted by Joseph, enters from stage right riding on a donkey singing Luke Garrett's "Magnify," a song corresponding to Mary's song of praise called the Magnificat (Luke 1.46-55). During the interlude, Lisa and Billy interact with Mary and Joseph who greets them with "Shalom" and Lisa even joins Mary's singing in duet leading it to the climax. After the couple leave the stage to continue with their journey, the stage is filled with shepherds, sheep and a host of about fourteen angels including Gabriel to the excitement of Lisa and Billy. The angels wear shining white costumes and start to sing "Glory to God" (music by Tom Fettke and lyrics by John C. Hallett) on the hill as other four angels dance to the song below them at stage center. When they finish dancing, the two wooden doors behind them open to show the newborn Child in Mary's arms. While all the Nativity sequence takes place, the modern characters do not remain simply as spectators watching at a distance but become part of the scene by talking, singing with and even touching the biblical figures to suggest that the biblical narrative reenacted on stage is as real as Grandpa, Lisa and Billy present in the same space near the Paluxy River with the audience.

Another significant theatrical device that the show uses for the reality effect is "witnessing." In all major scenes including the Nativity, Crucifixion and Resurrection, the play has a crowd on both sides of the stage—not to speak of Grandpa, Lisa and Billy—present in the moment and watching the event with their own eyes. When the angels sing and dance as described above, townspeople (mostly women and children), whom neither Matthew nor Luke records as part of the Nativity scene, appear and watch the supernatural beings with the

shepherds, and they even get to see the baby Jesus and the Three Kings in their splendid costumes come with their retinues to worship him. What the spectacular scene with the angels and animals communicates to the audience is that all the characters on stage, including the modern characters representing the audience, are the witnesses of the great event, and their collective presence itself is a testimony to the truth of what is happening on stage. Instead of having a narrator directly tell the audience that what they are about to see is true as in *The New Great Passion Play*, *The Promise* employs these subtle artistic means to deliver the same message. If Passions plays are rituals wearing the mask of theatre, the musical seems to be wearing the better mask, and that is probably why the musical generally feels more theatrical and therefore less ritualistic than the former. In terms of the entertainment-efficacy spectrum introduced earlier, the musical's higher entertainment value than that of *The New Great Passion Play* apparently puts it a little closer to the theatrical side, while both plays essentially move toward efficacy in terms of the content and goals.

Like *The New Great Passion Play*, *The Promise* invented a couple of non-biblical scenes and one of them is the conversation between the 12-year-old Jesus called "Yeshua" and his father Joseph at his carpenter shop in Nazareth. Again, this scene shows in what ways the latter is more artistically-oriented than the former. Yeshua, played by Tyre's son Andrew, wonders about what he sees in his dreams and his calling, and his father comforts him saying that he is "God's Son" ("Little Yeshua" music & lyrics by Claire Cloninger and Gary Rhodes). Although I could not confirm my speculation with the playwright, it seemed obvious to me that scene was added for reasons more artistic than spiritual, for it did not appear to serve a function similar to that of the laughing Jesus in Eureka Springs. Rather, it was a little puzzling since it was one of

the few inventive scenes in the show that did not seem necessary for the plot development. The best possible alternate explanation for the insertion of the new scene seems to be that the appearances of Joseph and the boy Jesus were so minimal in the source narrative (i.e. the twelve-year-old Jesus lost at the Temple recorded in Luke 2.41-51, which is the next scene in the play) that the playwright needed to create a scene just for the two actors. Whatever the reason may be, the Yeshua scene seems to suggest that artistic factors do play a part in *The Promise*.

Nevertheless, the next scene demonstrated that spiritual factors and artistic factors are not two completely separate things in the Passion play due to its ritual nature. Time goes by and John the Baptist preaches repentance and the coming of the Kingdom at the Jordan River. It is a beautiful scene in which John baptizes several people in the water-filled moat as he sings “The Kingdom of Heaven/One Voice” (written & arranged by Robert Sterling), but as much as it was an important scene, it had an interesting history of its contentious nature. As in Eureka Springs, *The Promise* has had some disputes with regard to the biblical accuracy of the production and two of them were its interpretation of the Three Wise Men from the East and John’s method of baptism. Tyre said that he had a man yell at him, “the Bible never says Three Kings,” which to him is a minor issue, though “not minor to them.” The second issue was that John in the play had baptized people by partial immersion,<sup>22</sup> not by submersion.<sup>23</sup> I speculated that this issue was raised probably because Texas has the largest number of Southern Baptists in the country, but Tyre said that it did not matter whether they were Catholics or protestants and it simply “did not

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<sup>22</sup> The baptized stands or kneels in the water while water is poured on them.

<sup>23</sup> Also known as total immersion. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin supported this method of baptism as biblical and it is practiced by mainstream Baptist and Methodist denominations nowadays.

satisfy anybody” (Tyre 2010). According to Tyre, partial immersion had been a directorial choice simply to baptize many people within the limited time allowed by John’s song, but they ended up cutting the number of people baptized and doing submersion since they found that it did turn off many people. Raised in a Presbyterian tradition that only does sprinkling (called aspersion), I did not think that it would have mattered to me as much, but it was a good case showing that each one has a different sense of ritual depending on their own ritual heritage and understanding of the Bible. In fact, the opinions of Protestant denominations on this issue vary widely, some denominations even believing that the correct performance of baptism is essential for salvation. And it was interesting that a theatrical representation of it can spark the same debate, which shows how seriously people take the Passion play.

As we have seen in the example above, artistic choices in a Passion play tend to be received as spiritual matters with a high degree of seriousness, and what happened next in the scene raised a red flag in that regard. As soon as John finished his singing, three Jewish priests, who had been watching him and the crowd disapprovingly, confronted him introducing themselves as the “sons of Abraham.” The characters, especially Caiaphas, were certainly over-interpreted by the actors since they were depicted as pompous, yelling bullies who could not stand the fact that somebody disobeying their tradition and infringing on their authority was getting more respect and popularity than themselves. Before the show, Tyre told me that the play would show the priests’ gradual and reasonable progress towards their plot to kill Jesus, but what I saw that night were common villain stereotypes based on easy acting choices. It might have been dramatically suitable since it justified John’s calling them “the brood of vipers,” but it looked highly problematic in political terms, considering the fact that this stereotypical

representation of the Pharisees is repeated throughout the play with its degree increasing each time. For example, after their confrontation with Jesus at the marketplace on his healing the sick on the Sabbath, they hold a meeting at the Sanhedrin court to discuss how to get rid of him. They decide that it is better for one man to die for many, and the meeting ends with an ominous chuckle of Caiaphas as the light fades out (one can imagine a black and white cut in children's cartoon depicting the villain's evil laugh here), which is followed by Billy's comment "how creepy." It was one of the few scenes that took me out of the play, because of the incredibility of acting (nobody laughs like that in real life!) as well as its unfair treatment of the Jews. And it was ironic to me that no audience seems to have reacted to it as seriously as they did to John's baptism. Would people have been silent because they thought that the representation of the Pharisees was authentic to the best of their knowledge? Or is it just that they don't care about the Jewish characters at all? Whatever the reason may be, I thought that the treatment of the Pharisees needed more fixing than John's baptism in the play.

In the context of discussing the play as a ritual, symbolism plays the most significant role in it since ritual is essentially symbolic, and a Passion play without the symbol of Jesus is unthinkable. As soon as the Pharisees withdraw from the scene described above, Jesus quietly makes his first appearance and stands before John to be baptized. I missed the moment of his entrance and only noticed him when he reached the center stage, since he entered quietly covered with a yellow green robe and stood still behind the crowd on stage right watching John's baptism until he stopped singing. As he moved to the center, a spotlight fully revealed him and John turned to him calling him "My Lord." As we saw in the first chapter, the character of Jesus had a powerful presence, as some audience members responded merely to his first appearance with a

loud cheer and clapping when I was there on September 11th, 2010, and I had not heard such a passionate audience reaction to a character's entrance in any other theatrical performance. And I thought to myself, "after all, these people came to see Jesus." A more fervent reception took place when John humbly baptized Jesus and the voice of God said "this is my beloved Son and I am well-pleased with him" as a dove flew across the rain curtain. To me who was sitting among the excited crowd, Grandpa's post-scene remark to the children rang so true: "everything changed that day when Jesus showed up. It's always good when Jesus shows up."

I later found myself mulling over this particular scene, for it raised me an interesting question: "why did the audience hold their cheer until the adult Jesus finally came out, since they had already seen the baby and the boy Jesus? Are they not the same Jesus? Why only then?" There would be several possible answers, and part of it would have to do with the theatrical nature of his entrance: the pause, lights, music and the reaction of the Israeli crowd to his appearance that suggested that it was the "superstar" moment often found in musicals. Another obvious factor was convention. In both 2010 and 2011 seasons, Jesus was played by the same young white actor but he wore some make-up to look olive-skinned (watching from some distance, I could not really tell whether that was his real skin color until I met him backstage after the show, although I noticed that he did not have typical middle-eastern looks) and a long wavy black hair wig. Not only his hair and make-up but also his costume (i.e. white tunic, over-robe and head shawl) closely followed the convention of most popular depictions of Jesus, which explains the audience's lower level of enthusiasm about the baby and boy Jesus since we do not have such a predominant image for them in our culture. Strictly speaking, what I saw that night looked more like a white American male in his early twenties than a Galilean Jew at the age of

thirty, but their choice seemed to work fine for we have reconstructed the image of Jesus in a certain stereotypical way. And I later became curious how the audience would have reacted had Jesus of the show looked like the image featured in the BBC/Discovery Channel's documentary film *Jesus: The Complete Story* (2008), which was quite defamiliarizing (i.e. dark skin, short hair and middle-eastern facial features) but based on some historical and scientific research. And what if they saw a black or Asian Jesus that night? While I can only speculate on the question, there is no doubt that the symbolism of the play works the best when it reflects the norm of the majority, what most people believe to be "authentic," and this is one of the ways in which *The Promise* becomes a ritual, when it serves as a site for the communal reaffirmation of the mainstream American tradition in which the Lord has usually been white.

In regards to the symbolism of the play, Satan, as another familiar Western symbol, here also plays a significant role in not only bridging the spiritual and the mundane as in *The New Great Passion Play* but also amplifying the emotional qualities of the narrative as the antagonist against Jesus. Right after John's baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, which is played by a female dancer—according to Tyre, it was the first time for a woman to play the role at the Texas Amphitheater, although the character was supposed to be gender neutral. Tyre mentioned that his motto in directing is "simple, subtle and direct" and was confident in the performer's portrayal of the character avoiding an easy choice based on "wicked witch" stereotypes. Indeed, the musical presented the most developed Satan I had ever seen as a character opposed to Jesus. Satan also impressed me with her eye-opening theatrical trick. In trying to tempt Jesus by showing him the "glory of the world," Satan suddenly takes Jesus from the stage center to the top of an arch entrance of the Temple on stage left with a



big puffing sound and smoke, as if they were capable of teleportation (they simply hid behind a pole on the main stage to disappear and there were another couple of actors wearing the same costumes hiding on the Temple entrance but the trick was so well executed that I was almost deceived). Jesus does not succumb to her enticement but defeats her singing “get away from me Satan, for it is written ‘worship the Lord your God and serve Him only’” and an angel appears behind Jesus to care for him (“It is Written,” music & lyrics by Steve Amerson and David T. Clydesdale). Here, the audience cheered again as Satan fled from Jesus, and it became clear to me that it was important for the play to have the evil character in order to stimulate emotions, since there would be no conflict without an enemy and a conflict is an important ingredient of emotions. Satan is silently present in many other scenes including the crucifixion to enrich not only the spiritual subtext but also the emotional quality of the narrative by serving as the “Other” in the play of differences.

While the essentially symbolic nature of the play generally seemed to work well in terms of amplifying the emotional quality of the Passion narrative revolving around Jesus, I noticed from the dramaturgical point of view that the emotional effect for the main character was achieved by sacrificing some realistic details of the play. As we will see more clearly in Part II through comparison, one of the most obvious characteristics of the Passion plays including *The Promise* is the centrality of Jesus while most of the other characters function merely as human scenery. For instance, even the twelve disciples do not get a lot of attention and their presence in the play is primarily symbolic as the followers of the Messiah, just as the Twelve in the original Gospel accounts represented the ancient twelve tribes of Israel worshipping the God of Israel. In the scene immediately following the Temptation in the wilderness, Jesus arrives in Galilee and

calls four fishermen – Peter, James, John, and Andrew – to be his first disciples. He helps them catch a lot of fish, which amazes the disciples to bring more people and declare the coming of the Kingdom together ("I See the Kingdom Coming" music & lyrics by Claire Cloninger and Don Marsh). Halfway through the song, Jesus tells them to go fish for men and the apostles bring in townspeople to join the merry chorus, which ends with all the people raising their hands to Jesus standing at the top of the hill. While the disciples appear in many of the following scenes as the major supporting characters, they are underdeveloped and little is told about them through the course of the play (perhaps just because the Four Gospels themselves say so little about them?), which makes it difficult to identify and care about each of them as a character. The play's symbolic treatment of most characters other than Jesus weakens their believability as distinctive human characters and eventually shows how central Jesus is in *The Promise*.

It later dawned on me that the symbolic nature of the play might explain the Pharisees' lack of depth in terms of realism as well, with their negative traits exaggerated as the opponent of Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders reappear to find Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount to a crowd surrounding him and begin to question his teachings. Again, the characters act stereotypically and I wondered if the scene would have worked better for emotional reaction had they been portrayed more realistically. Only Nicodemus is touched by what Jesus said, and he ends up visiting him that night to ask about "being born again" (this is the scene where Jesus delivers the famous John 3.16). In the play of differences, the function of the Pharisees is mainly to construct a scheme of opposition and the play is little concerned about the characters as individuals who have their own narratives and *raison d'être*. The problem is that the issues concerning this artistic choice on the Jewish authorities are likely to be more than artistic.

In the midst of our conversation about anti-Semitism, I asked Tyre how he tried to make the Jewishness of Jesus and the disciples clear. He told me that the disciples wear yarmulkes and Jewish costumes, sing a Jewish song and dance a Jewish dance, all based on historical research. This appeared in the next scene in which the disciples sing and dance together to "He Is Jehovah," a song incorporating Old and New Testament themes and composed and written by the evangelical artist Betty Jean Robinson. Later Jesus and even Grandpa, Lisa and Billy join the disciples and share a moment of joy and unity, although it turns out to be a short-lived momentum since in what follows a storm hits their boat and the disciples panic only to be admonished by their master for their lack of faith. I thought that the dancing scene had beautiful moments in it as the disciples came together during the hora, a type of circle dance widespread in the Jewish diaspora. However, I was not quite sure that the "Jewish" scene would help the audience sympathize with those who practice Jewish faith today (although it would be not their primary intention at all), for what the audience saw before and in the rest of the play were the bigotry, hatred and lack of humaneness of the religious leaders. At the marketplace, Jesus performs many miracles of healing the blind, lame, sick and casting out evil spirits, and a woman declares that he comes "In the Name of the Lord" (music by Sandi Patti and lyrics by Phil McHugh, Gloria Gaither and Sandi Patti), which ends with all people reaching their hands out to Jesus. In the middle of the scene, the Jewish leaders come back to angrily accuse him of healing people on the Sabbath against their religious law and try to test him with a woman caught in an act of adultery, but their plot fails and they finally conspire to kill him at the Sanhedrin court described earlier.

One of the things that Tyre emphasized in defense of the play was that there was no association between Satan and the religious leaders suggested in *The Promise*. And this was true throughout the play, since Satan only interacted with Jesus and the disciples. In the last scene of the first act that ends with Lazarus' resurrection (and the second act ends with that of Jesus), Jesus and the disciples gather around a campfire and the disciples ask their teacher about the Kingdom of God and when and how Jesus will become the Messiah they have been expecting, especially since he said that he would be condemned and crucified; interestingly, Grandpa here provides a theological commentary for the grandchildren that it is for the disciples' lack of understanding that Jesus revived Lazarus as a preliminary example. Peter impresses Jesus by saying "you're the Son of the living God" but is manipulated by Satan, who quietly moves behind him, to beg Jesus to avoid his death. And Jesus, seeing Satan behind this, cries "Satan, get behind thee," at which Satan withdraws. Certainly, Satan is the foremost enemy of Jesus in the play as the "axis of evil" in the play and it again occurred to me that the development of Satan as the dramatic counterpoint could be one way to call the audience attention to the spiritual meaning of the Passion rather than what the Jews did to put Jesus on the cross (although Tyre confessed that his motive for the development of Satan was purely artistic). However, this was not what was exactly happening in the play where the audience had seen so many stereotypical representations of the Jewish leaders that there was left almost no room for sympathy.

The pattern of Jesus' glory and confrontation with the Pharisees recurs in the second act. After a 15-minute intermission, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem riding a donkey, and people celebrate his entry waving palm branches and singing "We Cry Hosanna, Lord" (music & lyrics by Mimi Farra and Claire Cloninger). At the Temple, Jesus becomes upset to see the money changers and

angrily overturns their tables and chases them away ("My Father's Temple" music & lyrics by Jan Easterline & David T. Clydesdale). Then the Pharisees led by Caiaphas appear to confront Jesus with their first question about paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus sees their hidden motive and expresses his despise for the "hypocrites." When they disappear, Jesus once again tells his disciples about the impending tribulation and assures them that he and his Spirit will be with them.

As discussed earlier, one of the major sources of the power of the Passion narrative lies in its highly emotional content, especially the Passion sequence starting from the Last Supper. And the play featuring a soft Jesus takes on quite a melodramatic tone from this point on and what happens in the rest of the play until the resurrection can be described as a series of weeping. Jesus and the disciples gather for one more meal, and Jesus predicts that one of them will betray him and washes their feet singing "peace I give to you" ("Shalom" music by Claire Cloninger & Don Marsh & music by Claire Cloninger). And Jesus brings them, except for Judas who remains outside the group quietly crying, to the table and breaks the Passover seder to share with them and pours wine into their cups. As in *The New Great Passion Play*, the Last Supper scene did not imitate the da Vinci painting but displayed the play's awareness of the customs of the Jewish Passover meal including the use of seder and wearing the prayer shawl. After his prayer of thanks, Jesus tells Judas to go ahead, and Judas, followed by Satan, leaves the room. Jesus encourages the rest to stay strong in anticipation of the upcoming trial, predicts Peter's denial and commands them to love one another. The Passover meal encompassing the themes of friendship, separation and betrayal is only the beginning of the climax of the emotion-packed Passion narrative.

As in the previous scene, music continues to play a crucial role in facilitating emotional responses. Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray to “Abba, Father.” He sobs for a while at the beginning of the prayer for the fear of upcoming suffering and death but overcomes it while singing "Glorify Your Son" (music & lyrics by Steve Amerson and David T. Clydesdale). As soon as he wakes the disciples up, Roman soldiers led by Judas arrive to arrest him and take him to the Sanhedrin court where he is violently handled by the soldiers and accused of blasphemy by a few witnesses. During Jesus’ trial at the court, Peter recalls his time with Jesus singing "Yesterday" (music & lyrics by Rodger Strader) but ends up denying him three times just as Jesus predicted and breaks down crying. And the crowd participates in the mourning when Jesus gets flogged by a Roman soldier and finally sent to Calvary bearing a cross. As Jesus wearily carries the cross through the marketplace, a woman sings “Down the Via Dolorosa called the way of suffering like a lamb came the Messiah, Christ the King, but He chose to walk that road out of his love for you and me” (“Via Dolorosa” music & lyrics by Billy Sprague and Niles Borop). With loud nail-hammering sounds, he is nailed on to the cross on the hill, and the soldiers cast lots for his robe as Mary and Apostle John sing "Cross of Calvary" (music & lyrics by Claire Cloninger, Don Marsh, and Lorie Marsh). Jesus asks John to take care of his mother, and cries out to God, "Abba Father, why have you forsaken me?" and then breathes his last, "it is finished." Satan appears again excited with her apparent victory and laughs loudly at the moment of his death accompanied by thunder and lightning. Compared to *The New Great Passion Play*, *The Promise* presents a mild version of the “Passion” without the ear-cracking flagellation scene. Instead, the woman soloist’s song with a sad melody sets up the mood and augments the scene’s emotional impact.

And the peripeteia (reversal of fortune) at the end of the play turns the sadness that dominated the previous scene into incomparable joy to complete the cycle of the audience emotional process. Grandpa explains that Joseph of Arimathea put Jesus' body in the Tomb, and "a wonderful thing" happened on Sunday. Angel Gabriel appears at the tomb and sings "Arise" (music & lyrics by Claire Cloninger) asking Jesus to rise from the dead. And as the song reaches its climax, Jesus slowly walks out of the tomb with a smile in white clothing, and the loudest cheer and applaud of that night was heard. Then the women and disciples have a reunion of great joy with their risen master and the stage is suddenly filled with a festive spirit as all the cast come together on stage including Grandpa and his grandchildren. And Grandpa excitedly delivers the following message finally breaking the fourth wall.

The good news is when everyone believes Jesus is risen, he's alive. He is alive in you Lisa, he's alive in you Billy. And he's alive in your old grandpa here. When someone is thirsty, give them a drink of water, he's alive. When the hungry are fed, he's alive. When the sick are healed, he's alive. And when the lost find salvation, he's alive. Won't you seek him tonight? Jesus lived and died, rose again that we might know him personally therefore be born again. Being born again is not about being religious. It's about having a personal relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ. Love one another! That's what Jesus taught us. And when we do that, the Promise of God is alive in the heart of everyone who truly believes!"

Grandpa's last message quoted above precisely captures the point of the show. As we have seen in Eureka Springs, the most important message is that "a personal relationship with the living Lord Jesus Christ" is the way to salvation. And yet there are two notable differences, the first

being that it comes at the last minute in Glen Rose while it was frontloaded in *The New Great Passion Play*. The second difference is that it is “Grandpa,” not Jesus himself, who delivers the message, passing his religious heritage onto the next generation. He seems to be an effective channel for the Gospel since he represents not only the authority of the old generation but also friendliness and contemporaneity. After Grandpa’s final speech, Jesus gives the apostles his mission and takes a lift to reach the fly loft.

Jesus’ ascension is the end of the play but not the end of the ritual. When the curtain call is over, the audience can either take the backstage tour, during which a few crew members show and explain all theatrical mechanisms including methods of scene change, costumes, make-up and special effects and so on at \$3, or leave the amphitheatre to encounter actors waiting near the exits. As I was leaving, the actors, who were still in costume, acknowledged each audience member with a smile as they passed by, and those who wanted to take pictures with them got their wish. The most popular actor was of course Adam Richards who played Jesus, and he seemed quite busy surrounded by several children. Tyre told me that it was his wife Elizabeth who first made the suggestion and convinced him of its importance for young audiences, although he was initially opposed to the idea for fear that it should break the illusion of character. It seemed to me that this post-play interaction between the cast and the audience was the better choice for the ritual end of the show. In addition to the presence of the three modern characters within the world of the Passion play, the off-stage encounter between the two groups seemed to make the biblical figures a real presence in the everyday reality of the audience.



### **Evaluating *The Promise***

In general, *The Promise* shows a higher quality of acting and direction than the other Passion plays and incorporates many theatrical devices to appeal to the contemporary audience. It features believable acting, good music and eye-opening spectacles. On the other hand, while the all-smile Jesus in the show appeared less preachy and more “human” than in *The New Great Passion Play*, it ironically made him lose charisma and dignity to some degree from my perspective as an adult spectator, and I wondered if it is possible to keep a good balance between the two. For instance, while the recorded voice of Jesus in the Eureka Springs play had something artificial in it, his older looks and authoritative tone put more weight on what he had to say. Also, when expressing various emotions throughout the play, he did it in a more moderate fashion than Jesus in *The Promise* does. In short, there was something more “other-worldly” about him. Indeed, the musical’s interpretation of Jesus emphasizing his soft dimensions is a rather unique choice considering most Jesus films and Passion plays portray Jesus as authoritative and serious as the “Lord” and a man of “sorrows.”

Secondly, although I tend to agree with Tyre that music can take people to places where simple words cannot, however, I was not completely satisfied with their cantata-like structure. I was sometimes turned off by the interruption of the story with too many songs, some of which felt a bit forced into the play. And by the time I got to the latter half of the second act, I found myself getting a little impatient with the slow pace (because I, like everyone else, know the story well) and the power of music started to wear off since music had been constantly used in prior less important scenes. In this respect, I thought that Tyre made the right decision to cut some songs and strip away “extraneous scenes,” but I felt that he should have gone further. And one of

the major weaknesses of the script, as suggested earlier, is the shallowness of supporting characters; the audience never learn about their past and who they really are and they do not display distinctive characters of their own, which makes it challenging for the audience to care about them.

Despite all its aesthetic imperfection, however, *The Promise* provides the audience with a powerful ritual experience using an emotional narrative revolving around Jesus. As in Eureka Springs, the symbolic representation of the Passion ironically makes the narrative more “real” not only because it engages the senses with its dazzling theatricality but also because what is represented resonates with what the audience already know and believe. In addition, the use of songs amplifies its emotional impact and, most significantly, the introduction of the modern characters interacting with the biblical world achieves the fusion between the two different worlds, similarly to what Geertz saw in Bali. Here, the pre-show and the post-play also play an important role in achieving the reality effect.

Having seen the cast of *The New Great Passion Play* in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, I found it interesting to look at the census and see how the musical’s diversity reflects the regional diversity. There seemed to be a little more diversity in *The Promise* with a number of Hispanic actors mostly in non-speaking roles, the biggest non-white group in the cast (the 2011 production featured a Hispanic Pilate). Both in Glen Rose and Somervell County, about 19% of the total population are Hispanic (25.1% in Texas), while there is a minimal presence of other racial groups in the county (black 1.0%, Native American 1.9%, Asian 0.9% etc.) according to Census 2010. Accordingly, I do not find it unusual that 99.9% of the cast looked either white or Hispanic. Tyre’s casting principle was that he would cast anybody who meets his criteria, who has “artistic

sensibility,” and he was not opposed to the idea of casting an African-American as Jesus. It was just that “good messiahs are hard to find,” as the role requires certain looks as well as good singing and acting skills. Generally speaking, the major challenge he had in casting diversity was singing. He said that they had had some Russian, Korean and Indonesian people audition for the play, but typically they could not sing. In that case, they ended up participating in the play as the Crowd. On the other hand, they in past seasons had an African-American and a Caucasian playing John the Baptist, and a “just phenomenal” African-American woman soloist who played the woman singing “Via Dolorosa.” In addition, Tyre pointed out that their concept of one of the Three Kings was that he was African-American although the Bible just says they are “from the East.” Unfortunately, the black actor who played the role last year had to be away that season for “a family emergency” and a Caucasian actor played the role instead. Tyre was adamant that everyone had an equal chance at the Texas Amphitheater and the wide-spread notion of conservative Christians in rural America as racist was “a ridiculous stereotype” (Tyre 2010).

As a graduate student of a theatre department at a Midwestern state university who has witnessed and therefore can testify to the difficulty of recruiting diversity in rural areas, I did not find any discriminatory motive behind the low degree of diversity in the musical. Through the course of the project, I learned that the Passion play is one of the ways in which a dominant group of people *perform* and celebrate their local identity, and the demography is an inseparable part of that performance—as to who they are, what they look like and what they believe in—precisely because performance takes human body as its medium. And one needs to be very careful not to fall into an intentional fallacy when dealing with lack of diversity, since it should

be viewed in light of the local condition; in the play's case, the composition of the cast, probably, was simply mirroring their local demographics.

On the other hand, it also needs to be remembered that “performance” can be followed by consequences that are far from intended. There is always the danger of people taking things at face value and even the most boring banality can turn into a norm through repetition. And the stake is higher in ritual where two worlds, the mythical and the now, come together to constitute one reality. The predominance of white actors in major roles is true of all of the three Passion plays I review in this project, a practice that has been going on over 20 years. If that is a recurring and the *only* pattern in casting, it is hard to not notice that there is a correlation between the political condition and the religious condition in the representations of the Passion, similarly to what Geertz witnessed in Bali.

[T]here is an unbreakable inner connection between social rank and religious condition. The state cult was not a cult of the state. It was an argument, made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe, and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less, to those of the divine. (*Negara* 102)

In the “vocabulary of ritual,” the Passion plays seem to have constructed a sort of hierarchy between the majority and the minority. Therefore, it is urgent that they bring more diversity into their representations of the “Greatest Story Ever Told,” since there is no major Passion play that challenges the normative casting of Jesus as Jones’ black Passion play did decades ago. Monica

Wilson observed in her study of Nyakyusa ritual that ritual “reveals values at their deepest level” since “men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed” (241). And I think that the most important value that American Passion plays should promote—even granting that their foremost concern is spiritual—is caring about the minority, not comforting their audiences just by giving them what they believe to be “authentic” to bring more people in.

Another urgent issue that *The Promise* has to deal with, as I have already discussed above, is the play’s negative portrayal of the Jewish priests, particularly Caiaphas. Contrary to my expectations, the actor was so focused on showing how dull, arbitrary, and biased he was that the presence of two sympathetic figures, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, helped little to balance the stereotype. And in spite of the Jewish elements that *The Promise* incorporated including the costume, Joseph’s greeting “Shalom,” the hora and the Passover meal, the remaining blood curse seems to reflect their little concern about the issue and lack of awareness of the power of the representation. Would it be because it is not common knowledge in Glen Rose that a public performance of the Passion was sometimes followed by anti-Jewish pogroms since the Middle Ages? When I revisited the Texas Amphitheater in 2011, I got a chance to briefly talk to Adam Richards, the actor playing Jesus. He mentioned that his favorite feedback usually came from children who, not being able to tell whether he was real or not, often gratified him by saying, “I love you Jesus” (Richards 2011). Recalling the heartfelt reception of Jesus at the Texas Amphitheater as if Jesus had actually been there, I could not but wonder what the audience, including the young children who came with their parents, would make of the Jewish religious leaders. If the representation of Jesus more “theatrical” than “authentic” can give them

a “real” experience of Jesus and his Passion, is it totally impossible that they would believe the Jewish stereotypes as well?

Earlier, I noted that the show’s use of Satan as the dramatic counterpart to Jesus could be a solution to its issues related to anti-Semitism. Redirecting the audience attention from the Jewish religious authorities to itself, the otherworldly character might help demonstrate that the Passion was not a battle fought between Jesus and the “Jews,” but one transcending any human factionalism and schism. However, one should beware the opposite way this could go. In *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (1943), Joshua Trachtenberg argues that stereotypes of the “pagans” constructed in the Middle Ages were extended to the Jews to associate them with Satan.

[T]he tradition of a union between the two archopponents of Christ seeped deeply into Christian thought. If it originated purely as vilification, it was yet calculated to assume the proportions of actuality in the mind of the uncritical. The struggle against the forces of evil in the spiritual realm, exemplified by the devil and his cohorts, and against the enemies of the Church in the material world, prosecuted with unparalleled vigor during the later medieval age, impressed this subtle amalgamation of the two aspects of the Christ legend indelibly upon the public mind: the devil and the Jew joined forces, in Christian belief, not only in the war against Jesus during his life on earth but also in the contemporaneous war against the Church and its civilization. All the power of Christian propaganda was exerted to arouse fear and hatred of the Jews, for while Jesus fought the devil on his ground, his followers must destroy the agents of the devil on theirs, lest Satan

inherit the earth and truth and salvation be lost. Christendom was summoned to a holy war of extermination, of which the Jews were only incidentally the objects. It was Satan whom Christian Europe sought to crush. (21-22)

Although how much of this classical conception of the Jews developed during the Middle Ages still remains in the modern American mind is difficult to measure, Trachtenberg believed that a Jew living in the twentieth century was “still the ‘demonic’ Jew” to the modern anti-Semite (220). If this is what is still happening in some anti-Semitic circles, the use of Satan in the Passion play would have to be reconsidered or more careful ways of using the character would need to be developed.

In my opinion, the major barrier to solving the issue of anti-Semitism surrounding Passion plays (if it is solvable) is our biased historical consciousness deeply-rooted in the traditional scheme of differences. Although it is important to remember history in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes, we do not need to interpret the ancient narrative of the Passion literally and assume that Jesus and the Apostles stand for contemporary Christians and that the Jewish religious authorities of the time stand for those who identify themselves as Jewish today. In other words, we cannot read the foundational text of Christianity, which teaches us to judge ourselves first before judging others and even love our enemy, only to find the “other” in it. For instance, there is no reason to insist that the contemporary counterpart to the Jewish religious leaders and “those Jews” who crucified Jesus cannot be today’s Christian leaders and laypeople who hold many positions of authority in the country and abuse their power. The modern way of thinking based on the binary of “we” and “others” should be abandoned, and contemporary

Christians must find a way to turn the “otherness” found in the Passion back on themselves as a mirror to revealing their own mistakes and weaknesses.

As a theatre scholar and practitioner, I endorse the idea of striving for a certain artistic standard as *The Promise* does, since it is not what Christian theatre has been best known for. By that artistic standard, the show seems to be in touch with the secular world. In political terms, however, the production is not in touch with the outside world as it overlooks the power of its representation. In my opinion, it is mainly because the Passion play has usually been thought of merely as theatre or entertainment, when it is more than that. It is only when we equip ourselves with what I would call “ritual awareness” (i.e. awareness of when a performance becomes a ritual and of its power) that we would be more careful in re-membering the Promise, which, according to John’s Gospel, is essentially about the fulfillment of God’s love for all mankind as in the word of Jesus: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3.16; emphasis added).



### **Chapter 3. *The Man Who Ran* and How Ritual Works**

The chapter deals with *The Man Who Ran* performed at Picture in Scripture Amphitheater in Disney, Oklahoma. Following the same pattern as in previous chapters, I here introduce its setting and history, discuss how the performance ritualizes itself and identify how the strategies it uses differ from the other plays. In addition, from the vantage point of having reviewed all three, I provide a comparative and comprehensive assessment of the Passion plays at the end of the chapter. *The Man Who Ran*, a “semi-Passion play” combining the story of Jonah and the Passion, is of the smallest scale and most amateur as a theatrical performance, but it is easily identifiable as ministry and has the strongest ritual aura. Therefore, the play, which could be placed at the farthest end of the ritual side of the theatre-ritual spectrum, provides another illustrative case to illuminate the ritual dimension of the Passion plays.

One interesting point that the play raises is the difference between the Passion play and the church. In light of the fact that some of the people who do not go to church visit the amphitheatre for spiritual inspiration, the chapter theorizes how the Passion play is different from the church and what it tells us about both. The fact that some people opt for the Passion play instead of going to church demonstrates that Passions plays as a performance genre have become an established alternate venue for modern Christian ritual. Pitted against the nineteenth century Victorian America where the Passion and theatre were at odds with each other, the ongoing prevalence of Passion plays in the New Millennium shows how the cultural understanding of ritual and the concepts of the holy and the profane change over time. In addition, the comparison

among the three Passion plays will display their formal flexibility in spite of their ritual nature, which can be ascribed to the lack of a long Passion play tradition in the United States and the plays' dual nature. Being theatrical art as well as ritual, the Passion plays try to differentiate themselves from others by incorporating different parts of the Bible, arranging them in different structures and using different stage crafts. In this respect, the Passion play might be the most creative genre of Christian ritual nowadays.

The critical analysis of the three Passion plays towards the end of the chapter revolves around their representation of gender and sexuality. Not only are the major characters (including Jesus, the Apostles, Pharisees and Jonah) played by men, but most of the roles played by women also seem to replicate the medieval stereotypes of women; the women in the play are either the “angelic” submissive type such as Mary, Martha and Pilate’s wife Claudia or the opposite type, which is best represented by Satan. This kind of gender issue, not just confined to the Passion plays but American culture in general, shows how politically constraining adhering to the notions of historical accuracy and realism may be. Strictly retaining the male-centered structure of the Passion and thereby limiting women’s participation in the play simply replicates the conventional gender hierarchy that kept women below men. The conventional representation of the Passion also leads to the absence of homosexuals since none of the Four Gospels refer to the topic. If the Passion plays are truly about the Good News for everyone, then they should not treat the sexual minority as if they were non-existent. The Gospel message that the plays deliver will start ringing true for everyone only when they stop privileging white-heterosexual-maleness and incorporate people of diverse backgrounds.

## **Disney and the Beginning of the “Passion” Ministry**

Disney is located on the south end of Grand Lake o' the Cherokees, 60 miles northeast of Tulsa. The 1.4-square-mile town has a population of only 311 according to the 2010 census. It is also known as “Disney Island” since all its four directions are boundaried by water—the lake on the north, dams on the west and the east, and a wide stream on the south, which makes it difficult to bring municipal services into the city and therefore has limited its development. Eastbound from Tulsa, one has to go through Disney and drive another 3.5 miles to get to Picture in Scripture Amphitheater on Oklahoma State Highway 28. The amphitheatre complex, a cultural oasis (or “Disneyland” if you will) in the middle of nowhere, is comprised of a ticket booth, a dining pavilion, a gift shop, animal pens and an outdoor amphitheatre. The facility itself did not feel that tourist-friendly since the roads were unpaved and I could not find any signs as to where to park or how to get to the administrative office. However, the site was kept clean, and adorned with wooden arches and a circular terrace surrounded by stony pillars, it evoked some European rural garden fit for special events—they actually rent it for weddings, reunions and parties. The outdoor theatre looks like a compact version of the Great Passion Play Amphitheater with annexed mansions designating multiple locations in panorama. The buildings are a little smaller than life and more suggestive than realistic. A pond, which is used as the sea where Jonah is swallowed by a whale in the play, separating the stage and the audience seating area blends the exotic buildings with the natural surroundings to complement the aesthetic weaknesses of the stage. As in Eureka Springs, there is no seating division in the amphitheatre (in the 2011 season,

the ticket price was \$14.25 per adult and children under 10 got to see the show free) which seats about 800, a small number compared to the former and Glen Rose.<sup>24</sup>

Picture in Scripture Amphitheater was founded in 1985 by Bill and Linda Goldner, a hospitable couple with over 30 years of pastoring experience as Assembly of God ministers. One year prior to its opening, they had built a home for teenage girls called New Lifehouse, “a refuge, a place of shelter and new beginnings for over one hundred girls,” and it was to financially support the house that “the Lord gave Bill the idea to write a play and build an amphitheatre on the ministry grounds” (“Bill and Linda Goldner Biography”). *The Man Who Ran*, a dramatic presentation of Jonah, Jesus and the great fish, has been performed at the amphitheatre for nineteen seasons and was awarded the Governor’s Merit Award for “Outstanding Attraction” in 1999. In 2002, they opened their second play called *The Elijah Factor*, a play drawing a parallel between Elijah and Jesus written by Linda this time, and produced the play for four seasons, and received the "Crystal Pelican Award" by the Grand Lake Association for "Outstanding Attractions" in 2004. *The Man Who Ran* returned to the stage in 2006 for two years and then the amphitheatre was closed for three years (2008-2010) due to financial difficulty, and they reopened in 2011 with *The Man Who Ran*. For 26 years since its beginning, more than 200,000 people “from all 50 of the states and 110 foreign countries” have seen their performances (“About Us”).

When I visited the just-reopened amphitheatre on June 25th, 2011 (that year, they performed on Friday and Saturday nights during the period of June 17 – July 23), they had a very

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<sup>24</sup> Linda told me that the largest crowd they have had were 1,500, and the overflow were seated on chairs and blankets on both sides of the house.

small audience of about 40. Linda told me that they had had at least 330 on their least attended night before they closed and looked a little disheartened with their slow start. (I later confirmed with an acquaintance of mine who returned to Disney in a few weeks that the number rose up to over 200.) Without any sponsors, *The Man Who Ran* is a 100% volunteer production including the actors and the crew (i.e. no one gets paid), which is one of the reasons why they had to shorten their season from the three-month-period (June to August) to six weeks (June to July) as the falling economy made it more difficult for adult actors to volunteer for that long. As a matter of fact, Picture in Scripture Amphitheater, run by the Goldners family, is the most humble-scale organization of the three that I visited. Linda admitted that they were not organized enough to have something like the costume department etc. and she and her husband, who plays the main role in both plays, took care of almost everything including the costume, lights, crewing, dinner preparation and even fixing the popcorn machine. It was just surprising to me that they could gather over seventy volunteers to perform and work at the ticket booth and the gift shop so that the show could go on; as in Eureka Springs, the volunteers' participation in the play is not just their ministry but also their performance of belief. Still, the ticket sales was not remunerative enough to keep the theatre going with the annual cost between \$65,000 to \$80,000, and their major source of income was Bill's dock construction business besides the ticket sales and donations. And all expenses for the show including feeding the volunteers go out of their own pockets. When I asked Linda why they continue to produce the play despite the financial challenge, she told me that the amphitheatre was God's calling and they have had a lot of testimonies concerning the power of the show. Linda also mentioned that there was an audience member who returned in six months and attributed his recovery from an illness to the show

although it was not something that immediately happened on the site. It was clear from the interview that the amphitheatre was meant to be more than entertainment.

What particularly intrigued me during the conversation was her point that those who would not go to church come to see the show and be touched. What was implied in her remark was that there is something about the church that pushes some people away, and I later speculated that one of the things that could make the Passion play more attractive than a church gathering is its liminality. The former constitutes a temporary nameless community where people can just enjoy the performance without having to introduce themselves and have social interactions based on who they are, while being part of a church usually entails accepting the “doctrine” of the church, observing decorum and taking some responsibilities for the community as a regular member. And this might be the same reason why the mainline Protestant denominations have been losing their members while more and more people migrate to Pentecostal denominations such as the Assembly of God and nondenominational churches. More significantly, the liminality of the Passion play can be one explanation as to why Passion plays, mostly non-denominational and less dogmatic than church, became a popular medium for evangelical outreach since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Here, Emile Durkheim’s distinction between religion and magic seems to be useful to articulate the differences between church and theatre. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (1912),<sup>25</sup> Durkheim noted that while religion, whose belief system classifies things into the profane and the sacred, builds a solid community called Church

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<sup>25</sup> The book was originally published in French as *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* by F. Alcan in 1912.

based on a common belief and practices, the relationships magic gives rise to are rather individual and temporary which rarely become lasting bonds.

Religious beliefs proper are always shared by a definite group that professes them and that practices the corresponding rites. Not only are they individually accepted by all members of that group, but they also belong to the group and unify it. The individuals who comprise the group feel joined to one another by the fact of common faith. A society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relations with the profane world in the same way, and because they translate this common representation into identical practices, is what is called a Church. . . . Magic is an entirely different matter. . . . [Magic beliefs] do not bind men who believe in them to one another and unite them into the same group, living the same life. *There is no Church of magic.* Between the magician and the individuals who consult him, there are no durable ties that make them members of a single moral body, comparable to the ties that join the faithful of the same god or the adherents of the same cult. The magician has a clientele, not a Church, and his clients may have no mutual relations, and may even be unknown to one another. Indeed, the relations they have with him are generally accidental and transient, analogous to those of a sick man with his doctor. (41-42)

Although Durkheim's concepts "religion" and "magic" used in the quotation above do not exactly correspond to "church" and "theatre," the former distinction sheds light on the latter's important characteristics by contrast. As mentioned earlier, Passion plays, unlike the church, do not require their audience to hold the same doctrine but allow dissent of belief owing to the

symbolic nature of the plays. And the nameless community (i.e. *communitas*) that the audience constitutes during the performance dissolves at the end of the show, and whether they go separately back to their own parishes or do not go to church at all, it is unlikely that their brief encounter at the outdoor amphitheatres will develop into an abiding relationship sharing a common faith. In this respect, Passion plays are more *magical* than *religious*, although one could still argue that Passion plays are also like religion in that they try to build the *Ecclesia*, the Universal Church.

As mentioned above, *The Man Who Ran* was Bill's first script, and he had not had any theatrical experience prior to writing it. Both Bill and Linda believed in God's presence at the amphitheatre, and their ministry itself and the writing of the script were not an exception. According to Linda, Bill just got the idea of writing a play one day and began to write it without any other's assistance: "I think it was God," Linda said with a little excitement in her voice (June 2011). After I saw the play, I realized that her confidence in the play was more of a spiritual nature than artistic. And I was glad that they did not boast or make grand statements with regard to the authenticity or quality of their work. Linda was honest about their shortcomings and limitations, and when I asked about the casting process, she said she cast anyone who would look like the part and trained them no matter how inexperienced they were—she said she had a degree and background in theatre although she did not specify how much experience she had. The casting choice seemed feasible because, as in *The New Great Passion Play*, the cast lipsynched to the pre-recorded music and text and the distance separating the audience from the performers could cover their weak acting when necessary. What the distance could not hide was the fact that a lot, probably more than half, of the cast were teenagers. According to Linda, it was not



something particular to that season, but they, living in a rural area, had “always been able to draw teenagers” since they needed many actors and the boys and girls did not have a lot to do (August 2011). Considering that it takes about a quarter of Disney’s population to mount the play, the service of teenagers during their summer break would be almost indispensable for the show to go on.

*The Man Who Ran*, strictly speaking, is not a Passion play in the purest sense since the story of Jonah and the great fish constitutes the major part while a shorthand version of the Passion narrative briefly follows in the second act. Nevertheless, the Passion narrative obviously takes the central stage throughout the whole performance sequence including the pre-show Gospel singing and an altar call in the middle of the first act; Jonah is there to serve as a prefiguration of “something greater than Jonah,” since Christians view the Old Testament through the Passion of Christ, the supreme sign, or the “meta-narrative” if you will, to interpret all the other signs.

When I asked Linda why they chose to run the two stories in parallel as they did in *The Elijah Factor* rather than doing just a Passion play, she said that they just wanted to be different from other contenders such as *The New Great Passion Play* and *The Promise*. Her answer reminded me of Tyre’s vision of differentiating the musical from the older Passion play, and both he and Linda seemed to work on their plays with the awareness of and desire to be different from *The New Great Passion Play*. This is natural since the Eureka Springs play began first in 1968 and Scripture in Picture Amphitheater followed 18 years later (*The Promise* came three years after *The Man Who Ran*). The fact that the three Passion plays, although based on the same content, try to be different from one another seems to suggest that, unlike ordinary rituals such as

traditional worship service or baptism, there is no “right” way of doing a Passion play. And even though both *The New Great Passion Play* and *The Promise* refer back to *The Oberammergau Passion Play* as the arch-Passion play in their promotional materials, they are not bound by the ways in which the German play presents the Passion. As noted earlier, the advent of American Passion plays is an early-twentieth century phenomenon, the first accepted regular production being *The Black Hills Passion Play* of Spearfish, South Dakota, brought in by German immigrants in 1932, which arose in the context of mainline Protestant denominations losing their members and the efficacy of traditional ways of ministry challenged and being reconsidered. And since most of these early Passion plays including *The New Great Passion Play* were founded by individuals or non-denominational organizations, they were free from methodological or theological interventions from the Church from the beginning and therefore could develop independently. Rituals as they are, Passion plays are generally free-format even though they are still bound to the Bible as the Script.

Secondly, the three plays’ differences shed light on their dual nature both as ritual and theatre. Although the plays are meant to be more than theatre and they indeed are to many audience members who take the representation of the biblical narrative seriously, they are also works of art and do not just emulate other precedents but try to be innovative and creative. And it is this theatrical nature of the Passion plays as well as the absence of unified convention mentioned above that makes them more receptive to change and incorporation of new elements including invented scenes and new technology than a traditional ritual. Although the three Passion plays all have the dual nature in common, however, it should be noted that they differ as to which of the two dimensions, between theatre and ritual, is more dominant than the other. For

instance, whereas the artistic dimension is more emphasized in *The Promise*, the ritual side relatively appears more dominant in *The Man Who Ran*, leaving *The New Great Passion Play* roughly in the middle. And what is really interesting here is that both sides complement each other's weaknesses. For instance, even though *The Man Who Ran* features amateur talents, the performance still appeals to audiences since its ritual dimension gains prominence and calls the spectators' attention to that side so that they are inspired by its paratheatrical elements. We will be looking at some specific examples of this later in the chapter.

### ***The Man Who Ran: A Performance Analysis***

Similarly to the musical in Glen Rose, *The Man Who Ran* had a pre-show to frame its theatrical presentation as a ritual. When the clock struck 8 pm, Linda appeared on stage and greeted the visitors. She first invited a female college student majoring in music to the stage to give a testimony about God's presence in both her life and at the amphitheatre and sing a few gospel songs. After she left the stage, Linda came back and asked the audience to sing several well-known contemporary Christian songs along with her and shared how God saw the amphitheatre through the financially difficult period and helped them re-open the facility. The pre-show clearly demonstrated that the play was not an ordinary theatrical performance but a ministry. After the pre-show of about one hour, the show finally began as it became dark enough for the lights.

The first act, Jonah's mission and the repentance of Nineveh, is a somewhat creative blend of amateur talents, choreography and pyrotechnic and dynamic spectacles. Generally

speaking, it uses similar ritual strategies to those of *The New Great Passion Play* including the opening narration “the story you are about to see is true” and a symbolic presentation of the biblical narrative. The play starts with a few animated but silent images of the sinfulness of the Ninevites: idolatry, adultery and oppression. Here, the play uses satanic figures in black who mime beside the people to suggest that their sins are not simply human-driven but are the work of the evil, an important theme also found in *The New Great Passion Play* and *The Promise*. The color symbolism becomes immediately clear as the godly people soon appear wearing white costumes in contrast. God first calls Jonah to go to the pagan city to proclaim his message “Arise! Go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry against it for their wickedness has come up before me” (*cf.* Jonah 1.2), and the spotlighted Jonah does not know how to respond and just tries to ignore the call. The play then goes back and forth between a vignette of each Ninevite sin and the figure of resistant Jonah: people are proud of getting drunk with their quality wine; a merchant commits adultery with a lecherous woman whose husband is away on a business trip; Ishtar, the Assyrian and Babylonian goddess of fertility, love, sex and war, is worshipped as the supreme god; those who claim that “there is only one God” are ridiculed and persecuted. Jonah finally decides to go to Tarshish contrary to God’s instruction and rides on a ship to run away from God. Not long after the ship sets sail, a sea storm—achieved by boat-swinging mechanics, a couple of water sprouts, sound effects and lights, the effect of which made me feel like watching a 90’s Universal Studio outdoor attraction—terrifies the sailors. As the sailors discuss the cause of the storm, Jonah confesses his disobedience to God and asks them to throw him into the sea. As soon as they do so, the raging storm stops to their amazement and they vow to serve the God of Jonah only for the rest of their lives. Then a miniature whale near the boat swallows Jonah, the

man who ran away from God, and when the lights go out, Jonah's prayer to the Lord in the whale's belly for three days comes out of the speakers (Jonah 2.1-10).

What happened next was not only the most interesting and memorable scene of the play but it also showed how the play as a ritualized performance tried to achieve efficacy. God hears Jonah's sincere prayer and releases him from the fish's belly. Instead of going to Nineveh, however, Jonah began to swim towards the audience across the pond, and when he finally got out of the water, he picked up a cordless microphone on the front fence of the house and stood completely soaked right in front of the amazed audience. During our conversation, Linda mentioned that it was her suggestion that, instead of trying an altar call at the end of the show which was usually followed by "pitiable results," Bill as Jonah swim to the audience and do the altar call there (June 2010). The night I was there, the new strategy did not seem to produce a very different outcome, since no one responded to Bill's call in a visible way. As Ray mentioned concerning the testimonies surrounding their Passion play in the first chapter, spiritual effect of the play seemed to manifest mostly after the show.

Regardless of the audience response that night, however, I thought that it was a powerful way to approach the audience for a few reasons. Above all, it is a rare sight in theatre that a performer swims to the audience to speak to them directly with water dripping from his entire body; the visually striking moment provided me as an audience member with a "phenomenal" experience. The scene affected me in a different way from the other Passion play spectacles due to its unexpected and rare nature. Secondly, as Geertz observed, ritual works since the theatrical becomes the real during the performance, and it seems that the altar call was a moment when the religious narrative was fused with the real world, turning the audience into the people of Nineveh.

In this regard, the scene reminded me of the modern characters in *The Promise* which were meant to achieve a similar effect. Thirdly, it was a “sincere” performance, demonstrating Bill’s sincerity in his attempt at getting people to what he believes to be the answer to life’s ultimate question. Although sincerity is an essentially internal concept which can hardly be represented in a concrete way, the audience would have known that he then stopped acting and was saying what he himself believed, which was easily inferable from the fact that he had been playing the leading role in a play about Jesus over 26 years. Therefore, sincerity could arguably be performed and felt there at the amphitheatre for the audience had the foreknowledge of what the performer believed at least, unlike in a secular theatre where the audience usually have no idea of who the actors are and what they believe so that they may measure and discern their sincerity.

While waiting for responses to the call, Bill also shared the testimony of a past visitor who had kept running away from God for a long time and finally changed her mind due to the play. After waiting for a couple of minutes, Bill asked the mute audience to pray with him, disappeared to the backstage, and the show continued with a candlelight choreography to a background music ending with an image of the cross. What was noteworthy here is that the altar call was an integral part of the entire performance where the spectators were invited to *perform* as themselves by sharing their testimonies. In contrast to the Brechtian theatre which purposefully breaks the fourth wall to expose the theatricality of the stage (i.e. unreal) for the critical thinking of the audience, the altar call was meant to achieve the opposite effect. In conjunction with the opening narration about the truth of the story, the altar call was part of Bill and Linda’s endeavor to make the story of Jonah more “real” by relating it to the individual lives of the audience.

In addition to the conflation of the theatrical and the real, the next scene showed another way the play works as ritual. The prophet finally arrives in Nineveh to declare God's message, "yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown," and wonderful things happen. The people are touched by what Jonah says and begin to change; those who have indulged themselves in drinking confess that they have done wrong; the adulterers feel remorse and go back to their families; the "idolaters" realize the absurdity of serving the gods which cannot protect them or do anything useful to them; those who sold their captives as slaves find fault with themselves and set the prisoners free. Even the king is amazed with what is happening with his people and issues the decree that both man and beast fast, put on sackcloth and turn away from wickedness and violence. The action does not have a clear cause-effect development or try to explain their sudden change of mind; it "just happens" like a miracle. And yet, the scene, lacking probability and necessity in the Aristotelian sense, seems to work well within the ritualized framework of the performance, since ritual, based on the "grand narrative," is part of one's own tradition and therefore legitimizes itself. In the play's case, what was represented on stage was a literal rendition of what was written in the Book of Jonah. And since Protestant-driven Passion plays, as we have seen in the previous chapters, have a deep-rooted textual basis—i.e. the Bible being the ultimate authority as the source text, doubts on the representation of miracles like this can usually be dissolved by the point "that's what the Bible says" and further questions on the credibility of the plot would be considered as theological dissent rather than artistic.

Likewise, ritual in general frames an event in such a context that things usually impossible in the ordinary sphere become possible. One of the most representative examples in the western context would be the Catholic sacrament of the Holy Communion. According to the

Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, as soon as the priest consecrates the bread and wine on the altar saying “this is my body” and “this is my blood,” the bread and wine turn into the real flesh and blood of Jesus. Only if the ritual conditions are met and its procedures are faithfully followed, the miraculous change of substance is supposed to take effect during the Eucharist, and its ritual framework renders questions on its probability irrelevant and a matter of faith rather than an object of logical and empirical query. In other words, the ritual of Eucharist, unlike a scientific hypothesis, does not need a well-formed rationale to be effective but is legitimized by the tradition and authority of the Church. This is one of the most significant differences between ritual and theatre. While theatre also does create imaginary worlds where rare things become common and impossible things possible, it still requires a credible plot to be “good theatre,” and the *deus ex machina* ending of the first act of *The Man Who Ran* would be considered as an inferior dramatic choice by the standards of the modern theatre. And yet, the fact that it still works for the play reveals its ritual dimension, since ritual, in contrast to theatre, does not require a good plot to be “good ritual.” Rather, what matters is the participants’ “sense of ritual” and actually there is no such thing as “good ritual” or “bad ritual” in the same way we talk about “good theatre” and “bad theatre.” Whereas a theatrical performance is evaluated by artistic standards such as the finesse of playwriting, acting, design and so on, the efficacy of a ritual performance depends on the mastery of its tradition and how it resonates with the audience’s assumptions and beliefs. For instance, it would be as preposterous to say that a performance of the Abydos passion play or Ramlila failed for their plots are underdeveloped as to argue that a replica of the original *King Lear* based on vigorous and careful historical research should work



with the modern audience just because it was exactly the way Shakespeare wrote and produced the play.

As suggested earlier, *The Man Who Ran*'s major source of appeal lies in its ritual aspect, and the rest of the first act continues to closely follow the Book of Jonah. God sees the repenting hearts of the Ninevites and spares the city, and Jonah, who knew this would happen, becomes very angry and complains to God for being unreasonably merciful in saving the disobedient gentiles. Rather than answering him directly, God grows a tree over his shoulders to be a shade for him under an extreme heat and makes it wither the next day. As the heat becomes too much to stand, Jonah begs God to let him die rather than suffer. God sees Jonah's compassion for the plant which has had no previous relationship with him and enlightens him by saying, "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand as well as many animals?" Closing the first part, the narrator then gives the theme of the play—"even when a person runs from God, He still seeks away to show his loving kindness" and talks about Nineveh's temporary well-being and its eventual return to sin and the following destruction.

The narrator then immediately bridges the story of Jonah with that of Jesus: "A certain man spoke of [Nineveh] and Jonah, a man who spoke like no other has ever spoken. His words have wrung true for centuries now and grow louder and louder as each day passes by. . . . Hundreds of years went by after Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah and one day comes this confrontation." The second act, a "high school" rendition of the "Greatest Story Ever Told," feels like a "tacked-on" and has little character or plot development. Compared to the first act in which major characters are portrayed by adult actors, the Passion play presents teenagers as

Jesus and the Pharisees, which clearly showed the difficulty of getting needed talents with their limited budget. This was a turn-off to me for two reasons. The predominance of youth actors in the Passion part indicated that what was going to happen in the second act was less watchable than the first act and ironically made the Passion narrative less important than the story of Jonah contrary to their intention. Secondly, despite the make-up and period costumes, the characters did not quite look believable even from the distance across the pond since they were obviously too young to play such roles as Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities. And although their acting was generally fine, the rather unnatural voices recorded by adult voice actors made it harder to believe that the boy actors were actually saying the lines. This was not only an artistic issue, since it also affected the authenticity of the performance as a ritual. In addition, the dominance of youths in the play diminished its ritual aura and sense of ritual since an important ritual is seldom led by teenagers.

While I agree with Linda that people do not need to see another same Passion play at Picture in Scripture Amphitheater when there are many others going on across the country, the abridged Passion in the second act made me, who has seen tens of different presentations of the Passion on stage and screen, feel that something was missing. Forgoing the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus' healing ministry, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and so on, the Passion act begins with Jesus brought into the meeting of the Jewish priests. They accuse him of witchcraft for casting out a demon of a young man and demand a sign to prove that he is really from God. Connecting the first act with the second, Jesus thus answers:

An evil and adulterous generation craze for a sign, and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet. For just as Jonah was three days and three

nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. Behold, something great than Jonah is here. (*cf.* Matthew 12.39-41)

And then, with the aid of the narrator, the scene jumps to Golgotha—there is no Last Supper and even Pilate’s trial is replaced by playing recorded voices of the angry mob during a blackout. When the lights come up, Jesus and the two robbers, whose bare chests expose their juvenile physiques, are already hung on the crosses surrounded by a mocking crowd. As in the Gospel of Luke, one of the criminals gets saved for his belief in Jesus, and Jesus cries the famous line “Father, why have you forsaken me?” and dies on the cross. Jesus’ body is put into the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea, and the next day the women including Mary and Salome visit the tomb only to be told by an angel that Jesus is risen. The women are amazed and run to deliver the news. This is followed by the encounter between two disciples and Jesus, now in a slightly different costume, on the road to Emmaus, which is also recorded in the Lukan Gospel. Jesus walks with them talking about the Scripture, and the two men’s hearts start burning after Jesus disappears. In the final scene, Jesus takes his followers to a hill, gives his final instructions and slowly ascends to the night sky on an invisible lift with the background song celebrating the resurrection written for the show and sung by Linda.

Overall, the fast-paced Passion half requires familiarity with the Four Gospel narratives of the audience since the play does not have a character like Grandpa of *The Promise* who explains what happens in each scene and in between. And this helped me understand what kind

of audience they expected at the amphitheatre, in conjunction with the point *The Man Who Ran* makes using the story of Jonah. Since the concept of a man who ran away from God presupposes his previous relationship with Him (i.e. since people do not run away from a stranger unless threatened) as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, what the resolution of the first act implies is a return rather than a conversion in the sense of starting a completely new faith. And it was this sort of testimony, experience of initial resistance to God and eventual return to the fold, that was solicited during the altar call. For the efficacy of the play as a ritual, therefore, the play needed ritually mature audiences who were not only equipped with sufficient biblical knowledge and sense of ritual but also capable of seeing through the show's theatrical layer and finding the spiritual meaning underneath.

### **Race, Politics and Ritual Aspects of *The Man Who Ran***

In relaying the discussion of casting diversity and the local politics, *The Man Who Ran* is a difficult case, since the show just cannot afford to be selective in casting nor does it claim to be authentic. First of all, although most of the cast seemed to be white, nobody would take the representation of Jesus portrayed by a white teenager actor seriously in terms of authenticity. And when I asked Linda if she would cast a non-white actor as Jesus, her answer was a loud “yes” and she told me that there have actually been many Native American actors in the show and they once had a Jewish man playing God. She said she was not opposed to casting an African-American into the role of Jesus and would not care about the performer's race only if they looked the part. She added that they were in the Cherokee Nation and therefore whites were

not necessarily the most privileged racial group in the region. This makes sense in light of the current local demographics, although it was a result of military conflict, conquests and deprivation.

The relocation of Native Americans from the southeastern parts of the country to Oklahoma through the Trail of Tears in the early 1830s led to the establishment of Indian Territory in the eastern section of the state and made Talequah, 54 miles south of Disney, the capitol of the Cherokees. And the Reconstruction treaties of 1866 with the Five Southeastern Tribes (i.e. the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole) after the Civil War led to what is sometimes called the “Second Trail of Tears”; twelve to fifteen thousand Native Americans from various tribes were required to give up their homes in the Southern Plains and every other part of the United States and move to Indian Territory between 1867 and 1884 (Baird and Goble 131). The two historical events made the state truly the land of okla-homa (which means “red people” in Choctaw Indian language) with a great variety of American Indian people and explain “why Oklahoma Indians have often exercised leadership in the Indian community on the national level” (Baird and Goble 140). Although the Native Americans in the state got eventually outnumbered by whites after the 1889 opening of the Unassigned Lands to the homesteaders called the Boomers, Native Americans still remain the second biggest racial group in both Mayes County—of the total county population 41,259, 31,705 are whites (76.8%) and 12,353 Native Americans (29.9%)—and the state (white 77.5% and Native Americans 12.9%) according to Census 2010, and their population in the state has continuously been increasing.

Secondly, the play appears to fall short of anti-Semitism, since the Jewish priests, also portrayed by white teenagers, are undeveloped (even unnamed) and those who are not familiar

with the story would not even know who they are. This is mainly because the play provides little clue to their Jewishness except for the costume which does not set them apart from the other characters. Even Jesus' disciples are not an exception in this regard and there is even no Judas in the play. More significantly, the contribution of the Pharisees to the plot appears to be little and their brief appearances in the Passion half do not leave any particular impression. Ironically, the shallowness of the Pharisees as dramatic characters in the Passion part attenuates the play's potential for raising political issues after all, and I wondered if the ambiguity and minimal appearance of the characters could be one way to avoid issues concerning anti-Semitism. And this is a case which shows that what artistically does not work well in theatrical terms could make a better (i.e. more politically sound) ritual.

While the currently humble scale of *The Man Who Ran* makes it difficult to come up with a fair assessment of its aesthetics and politics, it ironically makes the ritual dimension underneath the theatrical layer of the Passion play more transparent. The play may not be the best theatre from an artistic point of view, and yet it seems to possess some qualities that transcend and therefore make irrelevant the evaluative categories of theatre such as directing, acting and design. What impressed me the most, as did the other two Passion plays, was the tenacity of the show in spite of the big size of the cast and the financial challenges. This is clearly because the Goldners and the volunteers regard the play as their "mission," and their goal, unlike the more artistically-oriented director of *The Promise*, seems to be far from putting the play on a par with the professional theatre. What is more interesting is that this seems to be the way most of the visitors to the amphitheatre approaches the play as well, since the theatrical factor alone, although it might have been a factor of the amphitheatre's three years of closing, does not adequately

explain the continued presence of the audience at the amphitheatre with only two plays in their repertoire over the past 26 years. This is not to deny the entertainment value of the show featuring several watchable spectacles created by the ensemble and modern technology. And considering that there are not a lot of other venues providing comparable entertainment in the rural area populated mostly by low-income households, *The Man Who Ran* must be worth seeing to the local people. However, its ritual nature seems to better serve the attempt at explaining the attendance of visitors from more developed urban areas and young children who are now used to seeing Hollywood blockbusters as well. Indeed, as Linda said, there have been many reviews that the performance gave them a life-changing and “authentic” experience despite some artistic shortcomings.

Such warm receptions of the play give us a glimpse of how the audience negotiate and reconcile what they see on stage (i.e. the biblical symbols) with what they already know and believe. Indeed, audiences at Picture in Scripture Amphitheater are not simply spectators watching a theatrical performance (if so, not many would drive for hours to see the play in the middle of the hot summer in Oklahoma) but participants of a ritual actively engaged in the meaning-making process. This means that the audience can even fill what is missing in the representation with what they have seen somewhere else or already constructed in their minds, and a good example would be the character of Jesus played by a teenager in the second half of the show. Although it was far from authentic, the imperfect mimesis could still work with the audience for something about the character resonated with the Jesus constructed in their hearts. Secondly, the performance also demonstrates that the major strategy of ritual is conflating the mythical world with that of the contemporary reality, as we have seen in Jonah’s altar call. And

the claim that “what you are about to see is true” and the testimonies surrounding the performance are also other common ways to achieve the reality effect. Thirdly, the liminal nature of its spectatorship is also an important, and attractive, ritual factor. Especially in comparison with church, the amphitheatre provides an escape from the banality and pressure of relationship routine. In this respect, the Passion play seems to be a convenient alternate venue for ritual occasion to many contemporary Christians.

### **Gender and Sexuality in Passion Plays**

Two common characteristics of the three Passion plays reviewed in the first part in terms of gender and sexuality are that women play minor roles and no sexual minority figures can be found. To begin with, there are only a few identifiable female characters in *The New Great Passion Play* (Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, sisters Mary and Martha, Salome and Satan), only two in *The Promise* (Virgin Mary and Satan) and none in *The Man Who Ran*. Even though the number of female cast members outnumber that of the male cast members in all three, these supporting characters do not have more than a few lines, and the rest of women actors are human scenery. The few female characters mentioned above can easily be classified into two opposite stereotypes: saintly and evil. If gender is performative and instituted through the repetition of stylized acts as Butler holds, it is rather obvious what gender stereotypes these Passion plays are building and sustaining. Of course, the minor position women take in the Passion plays, relative to that of men, is due to the male-centeredness of the source narratives reflecting their worldview. It is tempting to make the argument that the male dominance in the Passion play needs to be



maintained for historical accuracy and realism since that is what the script, the Bible in this case, says. However, our notions of historical accuracy and realism should first be interrogated. As aforementioned, there is no being historically accurate (in the perfect sense), and the Passion plays are already very selective in choosing what to represent or not and they even invent new scenes such as the laughing Jesus in *The New Great Passion Play* and the scene of the boy Jesus and his father Joseph at his carpenter shop in *The Promise*. If that degree of selectivity and liberty is allowed, why not with the representation of women, which has more potential to be abused to maintain gender hierarchy? Why would the Passion plays insist on the literal representation and casting while mainstream American musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) and *Godspell* (1971) have long promoted diversity by sometimes featuring an African-American female Jesus and racially mixed male and female Apostles? Hasn't this notion of biblical authenticity upheld by the Passion plays also been an excuse to hold women from the position of authority in the church?

The absence of the sexual minority in the Passion plays also prompts the same kind of inquiry. If Christianity is about loving one's neighbors, especially the oppressed, and the Passion plays are meant to be rituals through which lives are changed and in which anyone can participate to feel His presence, there seem to be more reasons to include them in the performances than not. It might be argued that representing the Passion as it has come down to us does not exclude the sexual minority since, in remaining silent on the topic, they say nothing explicit against them. However, the non-representation of the sexual minority leaves them in the closet and thereby invisible (as if homosexuals did not exist) and perpetuates heteronormativity. Watching the Passion plays performed by, of and for the majority (that is, white heterosexual

males) does not teach the audience to accept and love their neighbors who are different from themselves. It is probably this absence, or the neglect of the sexual minority, in the Passion that led to the development of somewhat radical notions such as the gay Jesus and Judas (similar to the proposed homoeroticism between David and Jonathan as an Old Testament example). Such interpretations of biblical texts seem to demonstrate people's inherent need to be *represented* and tendency to identify with those who are like themselves. Beyond the constraints of the written Gospels, American Passion plays should show that the sexual minorities are part of the Good News so that the plays do not give the impression that they are leaving certain groups out.

So far, I have demonstrated how the three Passion plays can be understood as rituals. First, characterized by differentiation, symbolic construction of reality, fusing the biblical and the contemporary and sense of ritual, the Passion plays display distinct ritual features, and those ritual dimensions are what make them a powerful medium for the communication of values. On the other hand, the Passion plays are a unique type of ritual due to their brief history in the American culture and strong theatrical nature. As we have seen from the three examples, they rather widely differ from one another in many aspects including scene selection, performance style and structure. Also, they are generally open to new technology and change in contrast to traditional rites that are often very slow to change. This is primarily because of their dual nature as both theatre and ritual and the three plays display different degrees as to which dimension is more dominant than the other. Regardless of the degree of dominance, the two dimensions do not necessarily work against each other, sometimes complementing the weaknesses of the other.

More significantly, the “ritual” understanding of the particular type of performances helps us to articulate the possible political issues they may raise. The Passion plays are based on the sacred narrative called the Passion that has been reinterpreted in several different American contexts. When a certain interpretation is favored by the majority and legitimized to have some political impact, the Passion can become a metanarrative suppressing other versions and those who are excluded from it, and this phenomenon can be noticed in the plays’ selectivity and use of biblical symbols. Since ritual is meant to achieve the fusion between the stage and reality, the sacred symbols should be represented with much care and stereotypes should be avoided, as discussed in terms of race, gender and sexuality above. Both *The New Great Passion Play* and *The Promise* need to be more sensitive to the historical and social issues that might have to do with their representations of race, gender and sexuality and make efforts to break away from stereotypes, considering the power they hold over their audiences as religious spectacles. As for *The Man Who Ran*, we might have to wait until regains its former glory and become a full-blown production to discuss its politics. However, the same issues can be noticed in their white-male-dominated and heteronormative representation of the Passion, although it may appear to be a harmless family entertainment and ritual celebrating the suffering and resurrection of the Christian deity as the others. Located in the middle of nowhere near the small town of Disney, the play is literally “a voice crying in the wilderness”<sup>26</sup> as the biggest-scale outdoor entertainment in the area and its local cultural influence cannot be overlooked. It seems to me that not a lot of changes will happen to the three Passion plays in the near future. Like any

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<sup>26</sup> A reference to Isaiah 40.3. According to the Gospel of Mark, the “voice” is John the Baptist preaching repentance and the coming of the Kingdom out in the desert (Mark 1.3).

theatre, they could either continue to flourish or shut down for financial reasons. If the former should happen, I hope that the shows will keep reflecting on each artistic decision they make, actively engaging with contemporary political issues and staying alert to possible ramifications of their representations. This is because their performances are *in* the world although what their performances are about might not be *of* the world. In this sense, spiritual concerns and political ones are seldom two completely separate things, especially when it comes to performance. As we have seen in the three case studies, performance in general does matter for this reason, and more so with American Passion plays since they carry considerable power and can result in great consequences.

As all these points show, the ritual approach to the Passion plays not only enriches one's understanding of their efficacy mechanism but also provides a framework to unpack important issues. Merely adopting terms of theatre, on the other hand, only leads us to draw an incomplete picture of the performances, focusing on surface issues such as the quality of the script and acting for instance. Such an interdisciplinary approach to performance in general equips one with "ritual awareness," increasing one's reflexivity on a performance event as both maker and spectator. In light of many political issues that have been raised concerning the relationship between theatricality and politics, the ritual awareness must now be the first step to performance, since any performance, after all, is "more than just a play."

## **Part II. The passion Plays as Postmodern Theatre and Alternative Ritual**

The second part of the dissertation compares the three Passion plays discussed in the first part to contemporary mainstream passion plays performed in the mode of critique. In contrast to the former which set up a differentiated environment and employ powerful symbols in conventional ways to proselytize, the latter use various postmodern dramatic strategies to achieve the opposite effect: to divest the symbols of their sacred aura by using them in unconventional ways. While the major group represented by the former is white heterosexual male, the latter, rarely concerned with “historical accuracy” and realism, recreate the Passion narrative into the various narratives of the minority, which try to achieve efficacy in mundane and political terms rather than spiritual. In this respect, the passion plays, similarly to the Passion plays possessing the dual nature, are not only postmodern dramas but also alternative rituals.

To articulate those dramaturgical tactics, I use the postmodern theories introduced earlier, with Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism “incredulity towards metanarratives” as my major theoretical framework. If we consider the American Passion plays as representing metanarratives promoted by the political majority, the passion plays in the second part introduce various micro-narratives that represent different perspectives on the Passion, many of which are not considered normative in the mainstream culture. The postmodern adaptations of the Passion diminish the metanarrative into micro-narratives, reducing the Passion, the narrative about Christ’s suffering, to the passion, the suffering of individuals in secular and political contexts. Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “rhizome” helps further articulate this reduction process. In contrast to the

Jesus-centered Passion plays featuring mostly white male actors, the passion plays transfer the central focus to other diverse figures such as African-Americans, Jews, Latinos, women, homosexuals whose heterogeneous and horizontal narratives constitute a postmodern vision analogous to Lyotard's own. Represented by the suspicion of metanarratives, de-centering and pluralism, the passion plays provide cogent critiques on the ritual aspects of Passion plays and demonstrate how the postmodern aesthetic tactics can turn the rituals of the majority into the passion plays that challenge the existing norm of race, gender and sexuality and empower the minority.

Each of the two chapters discusses two plays and they are grouped in terms of their dramaturgical characteristics. Chapter 4 examines how Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play: A Cycle* (2004) and Adrienne Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000* (1994) put Passion plays in a metatheatrical frame in order to criticize the political aspects of the Passion plays. The two plays' dramaturgical methods display interesting similarities to those of the Brechtian theatre and the Boalian one respectively, and it is in terms of this dramaturgical transition that the chapter begins with Ruhl's play and moves on to Kennedy's (thus reversing the chronological order). Chapter 5 is devoted to demonstrating how the metanarrative of the Passion can be adopted by the minority as their own and appropriated for alternate purposes as in Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (1997) and Stephen Adly Guirgis' *Our Lady of 120<sup>th</sup> Street* (2004). These diverse transformations of the Passion in contemporary American theatre show that "metanarrative" itself is a relative term that needs to be applied in terms of context. In other words, it is not so much that the Passion narrative itself is an American metanarrative as that it can be a metanarrative or a micronarrative depending on the way it is used in the particular context.

It is the negotiation between these different uses of the same narrative where one gets a glimpse of the process through which the American society conserves, challenges and modifies itself. Victor Turner's term "social drama" here offers a theoretical model to illustrate the process. According to Turner, the social drama is an aharmonic or disharmonic social process arising in conflict situations and goes through the following four phases: breach of norm, crisis, redressive action and reintegration (*From Ritual to Theatre* 10). Turner observes that the redressive action usually takes the form of ritual and speculates that there lie the roots of theatre, and it seems that the passion plays with their dual nature as both ritual and theatre represent a unique genre of social dramas. Challenging American metanarratives deriving from the Passion and linking the narrative of the majority to those of the minority, the passion plays not only breach the norm but also can serve as redressive performances for the social conflicts surrounding them. At the same time, the co-existence of the Passion plays and the passion plays in contemporary American culture demonstrates that the society is built on multiple narratives that do not necessarily concur and cohere with each other, and the dissension among those narratives, as Turner noted, is the driving force of the major social change. Appropriating the narrative of the majority and resisting the norm, the passion plays not only showcase American "social dramas" themselves, but also display how theatre can perform a redressive function in the American cultural and political arena today.

There are two notable methodological differences between Part I and Part II. While Part I relies on the geographical information of each site for the critical analysis of the politics, the notion of geographical setting loses significance in Part II due mainly to the nature of the passion plays produced by commercial and community theatres across the country. While all of the

passion plays originated from and premiered in New York, they are not attached to one geographical location as the Passion plays are. Thus, I would like to point out that the major difference between the Passion plays and the passion plays in terms of geography is that the latter were developed in a much more urban and ethnically diverse setting.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the passion plays are not performed as regularly as the Passion plays, and with no available professional performances or video recordings of them, I was only able to attend a couple of college productions when I was writing the dissertation. Therefore, their analysis in Part II could not but stay mostly on the textual level. However, I tried to supplement the lack of the performative dimension in the analysis with relevant newspaper articles and performance reviews, and these methodological limitations should not hinder one from seeing the contrasts between them and the Passion plays in terms of their theatrical/ritualistic characteristics and representations of race, gender and sexuality.

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<sup>27</sup> According to Census 2010, 44% of the total New York City population 8,175,133 is white, 28.6% Hispanic/Latino, 25.5% black, 12.7% Asian, 0.7% American Indian etc.



## Chapter 4. From Brecht to Boal:

### Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play: A Cycle* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000* as Anti-Ritual

In this chapter, we will see how Ruhl's *Passion Play: A Cycle* and Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000* embody Brechtian and Boalian techniques to reveal Passion plays' relationship to politics and to challenge their normativity as grand narratives. The two metatheatrical plays expose the theatricality of the Passion-plays-within-the-plays to hinder emotional engagement and encourage critical thinking instead. Ruhl's *Passion Play: A Cycle* examines the role of Passion plays and theatricality in the contemporary politics of three different settings: England 1575, Germany 1934 and South Dakota 1969-the present. In each part, Ruhl presents how the prominent political figures of the times, Queen Elizabeth, Adolf Hitler and Ronald Reagan, used theatre for their political agendas and how useful Passion plays were in this regard since they were "more than just a play." Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000* takes this critical approach farther to the level of praxis. In the play set in an imaginary future, she uses the all-white cast of the Passion-play-within-the-play as a metaphor for the status quo of contemporary politics. What is defamiliarizing here is the fact that all of the actors including the one playing Jesus are the former authorities who were involved in the black protagonist Writer's son's case of racist brutality. As a spectator-turned-spect-actor, the Writer intervenes into the action of the play and improvises her solution to achieve revenge, as if they were practicing the Theatre of the Oppressed.

Both plays use postmodern dramaturgy that resists metanarratives, theatrical realism employing powerful religious symbols and emotional engagement to alienate the audience from the Passion narrative. As a result, the Passion plays are desacralized; by revealing the gap between the actors and the biblical figures that they play and by calling attention to the political contexts in which the performances are situated, both Ruhl and Kennedy show that the Passion-plays-within-the-plays were far from “holy.” In this respect, the two passion plays are postmodern anti-rituals that divest Passion plays of their sacred power in relation to politics.

### **Epic Theatre in Ruhl’s *Passion Play: A Cycle***

Sarah Ruhl’s *Passion Play: A Cycle* received its world premier at Arena Stage in Washington D.C. in September, 2005, followed by other notable productions at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago (September 2007), Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, CT (September 2008), and most recently at The Irondale Center in Brooklyn, NY (May 2010). In the “Playwright’s Note” published as the preface to the script, Sarah Ruhl mentions that she was “interested in how leaders use, mis-use and legislate religion for their own political aims, and how leaders turn themselves into theatrical icons.” Asked by Arena Stage to write a play about America, she decided to write about Passion plays for she “realized that little is more American than the nexus of religious rhetoric, politics, and theatricality” (xi). Although she did not use the term “ritual” to articulate what she meant by “the nexus of religious rhetoric, politics, and theatricality,” her association of theatre with politics seems to resonate with Kertzer’s view of ritual as inherently political. It is the moment of transition from theatre to ritual—when theatre

becomes political ritual to be abused—that she dramatizes in the play using three semi-historical cases. In order to make the audience critically observe these moments, she puts three past Passion play productions within a meta-theatrical and non-realistic cycle.

The most notable dramatic technique Ruhl uses for her critical purpose is the Alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*; more literally translated as “Estrangement effect”) developed by the German director Bertolt Brecht. As a challenge to the realist theatre which, according to him, makes the spectators passive and leave theatre accepting the status quo as unchangeable, he proposed what he called the “epic theatre” whose essential point is that “it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason,” and “[i]nstead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things” (23). What is fundamental to the epic theatre is the Alienation effect, which is to transfer the audience attention from the illusion of the stage to the social reality which the play represents so as “to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident” (Brecht 136). This is achieved by breaking the realism of the performance with, for example, a narrator directly speaking to the audience, unconcealed stagehands and the use of music, placards etc. to lay bare the theatricality of the performance. In terms of acting, the stage should be “purged of everything ‘magical,’” and the Brechtian theatre rejects “any attempt to make the stage convey the flavor of a particular place (a room at evening, a road in the autumn)” (136). What Brecht ultimately wanted from his audience was that they would find something wrong with the things they previously took for granted in their everyday reality, desire to change the status quo and put it into action.

Although Ruhl’s *Passion Play* is not driven by the same ideological agenda as Brecht’s epic theatre was, the play employs disruptive methods to unravel their essential theatricality and

shift the focus from the linear, coherent narrative revolving around Jesus to the micronarratives of the actors of Passion plays. The first part of the play, set in a village in Northern England in spring 1575, begins with a man on a cross in an open space with only the suggestion of the sea, which is in contrast to the spectacular and realistic sets of the Passion plays. The stage direction says, “at first we are not sure whether or not this is a real crucifixion,” but the spiritual aura of the symbol is put out right away by a carpenter who starts measuring the man. From the very beginning, the play hinders emotional engagement with the biblical narrative by presenting the characters as “actors” and symbols like the cross as “props.” The play presents the actors’ everyday lives, not the life of Jesus, including their monologues and rehearsals. If we think of the presentation of the Passion play actors’ lives as an “alienation” of the audience from the world of the Passion-play-within-the-play, Ruhl’s play doubly alienates the spectators by having the actors directly communicate with them and play multiple roles in different parts of the cycle. For instance, Pontius, the crooked man playing Pilate and Satan in the English mystery play, shares his dislike of his brother playing Jesus with the audience and grimaces to them while he talks with Visiting Friar in Scene 2 of Part 1. In the three Passion plays reviewed in the previous part, there was only one instance of this type of breach of the fourth wall, and it was when the actor playing Jonah in *The Man Who Ran* swam to the audience to conduct an altar call. This, however, was not to alienate the audience as in the epic theatre but to the opposite effect: to make the story represented on stage more real. And while there was no actor doubling major roles in any of the Passion plays, the actor playing Pontius in the first part of Ruhl’s cycle plays Foot Soldier and P in the second and third parts, the other ten actors also playing three different roles respectively.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Each cycle has eleven characters in it and “the full play requires eleven actors” according to

It is clear that Ruhl's intention is not to achieve the sort of realism commonly found in the Passion plays (and in modern American theatre) but to keep the world of the play and the reality of the audience separate for critical observation.

In addition to exposing the theatricality of Passion plays, Ruhl puts the performances in highly secular contexts so as to defamiliarize the sacred symbols of the Passion narrative. In Scene 5, Mary 1 (playing Virgin Mary) and Mary 2 (playing Mary Magdalene) are gazing at the body of John the Fisherman (who plays Jesus) on the cross, not as the holy body of Christ but as an object of their sexual desire. Mary 1, wearing a halo, is stimulated by his almost naked body and exclaims "His loincloth is slipping!" (Ruhl 23). This is not only a reversal of the traditional gender roles which rendered male as the voyeur and female as an object of desire—a common theme in Ruhl's works—but also desacralizes the body of the actor playing Jesus by treating it as a sexual object. More disturbing is Mary 2's joke "It's sinful to covet your own son, Mary" (Ruhl 25), which makes the audience think about the gap between theatre and reality. The significance of exploring the gap lies in that some of the traditional sources of the transcendental power of Passion plays were numerous legends surrounding the holiness of the actors embodying biblical figures such as Jesus and Virgin Mary:

I started writing this play fourteen years ago after rereading a childhood book which includes an account of Oberammergau in the early 1900s. In this old-fashioned narrative, the man who played Christ was actually so holy as to have become a living embodiment. The woman who played Mary was, in real life, just

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Ruhl (7). In terms of the significance of the number twelve in Judeo-Christian theology and Passion plays, the number of actors in the play also indicates its unconventional character.

as pure as the Virgin. I started thinking, how would it shape or misshape a life to play a biblical role year after year? How are we scripted? Where is the line between authentic identity and performance? And is there, in fact, such a line? (Ruhl ix)

As a ritual, it must have been important for Passion plays to be authentic that the bodies of the actors were differentiated as well, and Ruhl's depiction of the actors as flesh and blood like any other undoes the differentiating process since the holiness of the actors is one of the conditions in which the ritual of the Passion achieves the fusion between theatre and reality (i.e. the play is "real" since the actors are as holy as the biblical figures they embody). Although contemporary American Passion plays have not developed such legends to feed on, any knowledge on the actors' immoral off-stage lives would be detrimental to the realism of the performance.

In the following scenes, Mary 2 tells Visiting Friar about her lesbian dreams during a confessional only to hear from him that "That is indeed a sin" (Ruhl 27), and Mary 1 later has sexual intercourse with Pontius and bears a child, an ironic twist of the Virgin Birth. All actors participating in the Passion play are far from being holy and turn out to be ordinary sexual beings. Like the fish which was once used as an early Christian symbol (i.e. *Ichthys* in Greek) but is only a gangrene-smelling object to be gutted by Pontius in Ruhl's play, the biblical characters portrayed by the townspeople lose their sacred aura due to the disclosure of the sexual desire and moral dilemmas of the down-to-earth human actors. Considering that the core elements of ritual are its symbols as Geertz viewed, the passion play turns the ritual of the Passion into a Brechtian theatre where signs are detached from their traditional referents to be looked at from a neutral perspective. And with her parodies of the biblical narratives and symbols, Ruhl seems to even

attempt at challenging the integrity and credibility of the Passion narrative itself, especially concerning the moral purity of the major biblical figures such as Jesus and Mary, almost equating humaneness with sexuality.

The most significant result of the alienation of the characters in the play is the replacement of the narrative surrounding the public ministry of Jesus with the micro-narratives of the actors. John the Fisherman, like Joseph of the Nativity, proposes Mary 1 for marriage in spite of her pregnancy, but she feels guilty about her affair with Pontius and runs away. In lieu of Mary 1, the Director casts the Village Idiot in her place, and the Holy Passion Play, a mystery cycle starting with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, is finally presented to the townspeople. However, Queen Elizabeth, who banned all religious plays in 1575, makes her entrance to interrupt the play even before the first scene ends and gives a monologue which ironically reveals the highly theatrical nature of her own public persona: “They do not know that Queens do not wash, and that Queens are obliged to paint their faces so that Queens do not appear to become old or ugly” (Ruhl 71). And the first part ends with John bringing in Mary 1’s drowned body and Pontius’ suicide. As we have seen so far, the first part is far from a Passion play but rather a tragedy of the actors with the Passion narrative only in the background.

Part 2 is set in Oberammergau, Bavaria, in 1934, the year of the Passion play’s three hundred year anniversary. Similarly to the first part, the second part is presented in an open space with the “suggestion” of the forest, and the preparation for the Passion play is observed by an outsider, Visiting Englishman, like Visiting Friar in Part 1, who provides a defamiliarizing point of view for the critical observation of the audience. And the second part also revolves around the micro-narratives of the actors participating in the famed German Passion play. Eric, played by

the same actor who played John the Fisherman in the previous part, does not share the passion for portraying Jesus that his father had and struggles with the lines that he has to memorize. He is “tired of crucifixions” for the physical demand it requires (Ruhl 90), and later turns out to be in a homosexual relationship with Foot Soldier (played by the actor who formerly played Pontius). Elsa, playing Virgin Mary in Oberammergau, has refused three men who proposed marriage since she wants to keep the part but is actually a mistress of German Officer. As in the first part, Ruhl detaches the actors from the characters to break the illusion of their holiness by describing them primarily as sexual beings. Contrary to the Passion plays where sexuality is a subject of the least importance, the continuous evocation of human sexuality in the passion play keeps the audience attention on the secular level.

What should be noted here is the parallel drawn between the Passion play and the Nazis in terms of their sexual norms. As *The Oberammergau Passion Play* excluded women with sexual experience from playing Virgin Mary for the assumption that sexuality is not a normative part of holiness<sup>29</sup> (also to achieve the conflation between the reality of the stage and the reality of the audience in ritual terms as mentioned above), the Nazis saw same-sex relationship as non-normative and persecuted those with a homosexual orientation. At the end of Scene 12, German Officer suspiciously watches Eric and Foot Soldier’s embrace, and in the following scene, he orders the latter to put his hand on “the Virgin’s behind” and repeat after him, “How I love womanly flesh” (Ruhl 131). And then the officer asks Foot Soldier, “Soldier, do you know what

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<sup>29</sup> The virginity of the actor playing Virgin Mary has not been the play’s only requirement of its actors. Others include: birth in Oberammergau or 20 years’ residence; no makeup or wigs; use of costumes hand sewn by Oberammergau villagers; no casting of professional actors—in the 2010 production, Jesus was played by a psychologist and Mary Magdalene by a flight attendant.



happens to men in the German army who do not appreciate women the way a man should?” (Ruhl 132). The irony of the scene is that Elsa and German officer are currently having an affair which would not be considered normative either but the officer’s oppression of Foot Soldier is legitimized by the politically-charged sexual norm of the time.

As mentioned earlier, the reduction of Passion to passion in Ruhl’s play is achieved by the replacement of the Christ-centered narrative with alternate narratives that function as political commentaries. While Part 2 shows a few rehearsal scenes of the Passion play, the actual presentation of the Passion narrative is continuously deferred by the interruption of Violet, formerly called Village Idiot, as in the first part. In Scene 10 where they rehearse the Last Supper for example, Eric comes late to the rehearsal after a mushroom hunting and keeps forgetting his lines. Then Violet hides herself under the table to feed him lines that she improvises herself:

In time, you will crawl around like pigs snorting in the mud looking for the answer to this fundamental question: is there God? And if you decide that there is no God, will you need someone with vision, someone stronger, to tell you what to do? Resist, I say unto you! And finally, I want everyone at this table, eating my blood and my body, to remember that I am a Jew. (Ruhl 120)

Ruhl here uses one of the most important moments of the Passion narrative for the audience to think critically about the Nazi regime under the manipulative leadership of Hitler who had the vision of killing millions of Jews. By alienating the audience from the Passion to the passion, she turns a ritual of illusion into an epic theatre of instruction.

As we have seen in the first part, part of the alienation process involves divesting Christian symbols of their sacred meaning and presenting them as ordinary symbols. While put in a box for mocking the voice of Christ during the rehearsal, Violet talks to herself: “A cross is like someone is cross with you so he folds his arms across his chest. A cross is like I cross my heart and hope to die—is like telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. A cross is like I’m cross-eyed so I can’t see” (Ruhl 126). Just as the fish was represented just as a fish detached from its Christian reference, so the cross is referred to in its everyday sense of the word. This is only another instance of the undifferentiating process of symbols Ruhl takes on throughout the play.

As the performance of the Holy Passion Play was interrupted by the arrival of the Queen in the first part, the German passion play is stopped by the most notable political figure of the time. And Ruhl times his entrance in such a way that the famous angry mob scene before Pilate featuring the notorious blood curse is defamiliarized by the Nazi context.

One of our most important tasks will be to save future generations and to remain watchful in the knowledge of the menace of the Jews. For this reason alone it is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of the Jews been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually superior, there he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of the Jews. (Ruhl 138)

The above is a quotation from Hitler's actual remarks at a dinner in 1942 after attending two Oberammergau Passion play performances in 1930 and 1934. And with the historical fact Ruhl shows that the Passion play was once appropriated as a public ritual to legitimize the Nazi persecution of the Jews. And everyone except for Violet and Visiting Englishman responds to him with "Heil," the salute expressing obedience to the leader of the Nazi party.

The most striking moment of the play comes when Eric, years after Hitler's visit, returns in a Nazi uniform. Violet, awoken from her sleep, is startled with his "new costume" and the news that he is taking her away. And Violet reminds him of his own foreshadowing.

VIOLET. Well, you're a man now. Why are they taking me away?

ERIC. You're not a native Oberammergauer.

VIOLET. I lived in the village my whole life.

ERIC. It's different.

VIOLET. Different how?

ERIC. You have different blood.

VIOLET. Jesus was a Jew.

ERIC. Kind of. But not really.

VIOLET. Do you remember your lines from the play? Many shall come in my name, saying "I am Christ" and shall deceive the multitudes . . . For false Christs and false prophets shall rise. The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not

give her light . . . Take heed. Watch and pray; lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping. (Ruhl 143-44)

Like a false messiah, a Christ of the Passion play has returned as a pawn of the genocidal regime, and the second part ends with Eric pushing Violet into the light symbolizing an approaching train. The final scene is another instance of using the Passion narrative as a frame for political commentaries to stimulate critical thinking. The scene has added significance because it is based on the historical fact that the director and the actor who played Jesus in 1934 Oberammergau were members of the Nazi party. As a result, the audience, far from being immersed in the world of the religious narrative and dwelling on its transcendental meaning, is constantly alienated from the action of the “Greatest Story Ever Told” and led to think what the religious play did on the social level aside from keeping the Vow and proselytizing. And those who have been instructed by Ruhl’s play would not be able to see the angry mob scene with the blood curse and the stereotypical representation of the Jewish priests at the Texas Amphitheater without remembering the disturbing history.

Part Three takes place in Spearfish, South Dakota, between 1969 and the present. The opening speech by the Ensemble relays the ominous tone of the two preceding parts with imagery such as “red earth,” “dead tribes,” “knickknacks, ghost towns,” “badlands,” “the Battle of Wounded Knee<sup>30</sup>,” and “blood” (Ruhl 153-54). As in the other parts, the third part avoids the presentation of the Passion and starts at the backstage of the Black Hills Passion Play “after a

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<sup>30</sup> The Battle of Wounded Knee refers to the 1890 massacre of about 150 Lakota Sioux by the US 7th Cavalry Regiment that happened near Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota. It was part of the Ghost Dance War, an armed conflict between the United States government and the Native Americans from 1890 until 1891.

performance” where J and P, the two bothers playing Jesus and Pilate, are taking off their costumes and makeup (Ruhl 155). P, in love with Mary 1 playing Eve and Virgin Mary, is leaving for the Vietnam War and asks his brother to take care of his soon-to-be wife. However, one afternoon after P is gone for the war, J offers Mary 1 to smoke marijuana with him to be “stoned” and they sleep together. Mary 1 becomes pregnant and confesses her “sin” to her sister Mary 2 in the tollbooth where she works, another parody of the Catholic sacrament. In a similar pattern to what we saw above, Part Three challenges the assumption about the holiness of the Passion play actors by providing their off-stage lives.

Ruhl continues to alienate the narrative of the Passion by inserting subtexts that break the illusion of the biblical characters and refer to contemporary issues. In Scene Nine, J and Mary 1 are rehearsing the Crucifixion with Director and both of them are having a hard time feeling the parts. Then Director suggests to Mary 1 that she think about the Vietnam War when she says “Why? Why is my son slain?” and the subtext of the war which killed many sons of America makes her actually weep. Later at the beginning of Act Two, P returns alive from the war traumatized by the cruelty he has witnessed there and sees imaginary blood and Hitler while rehearsing Pilate’s washing of his hands with water as a gesture of innocence. He stops the rehearsal challenging Young Director saying, “Wait. The Jews are saying: kill Jesus! But they’re religious men, right? And Pilate was a bad guy, a tyrant. How come they want to kill him and I’m being all heroic—like—no, no, I can’t kill him?” (Ruhl 199). P here represents the opinion of the Anti-Defamation League which problematized the positive portrayal of Pilate and the vilifying of the Jews, and he changes his line as follows: “I, Pontius Pilate, an agent of the State, condemn this man to death. Not the Jews, not history. *I* will take responsibility. Now take him

and crucify him” (Ruhl 201). The third instance comes ten years after P and Mary 1’s divorce when J, who is now a professional actor appearing on TV, is called back to perform Jesus in the Passion play again for Ronald Reagan, the “actor” president, who visits the town to watch the play. In spite of the adulterous subtext—J and Mary 1 embrace “full of love” and “look into each other’s eyes, less like the Virgin Mary and Jesus and more like lovers” (Ruhl 231)—their performance of the parting scene between Jesus and his mother before the crucifixion is so moving that it makes even the president wipe his tears. All these subtexts are meant to break the illusion of the stage and prepare people to watch Passion plays critically.

However, Ruhl’s ultimate goal is not limited to simply alienating Passion plays, since she extends her treatment of the religious theatre to the broader socio-political context. A nexus of theatricality, religion and politics himself, Reagan arrives in town and gives a speech that starts with “The Star Spangled Banner” in the background and closes the speech with the following introduction to the play: “It’s morning in America. We are that city shining on a hill. We are a people chosen by God to settle in a promised land. You are that promise. We are that promise. And now, I give you, the greatest story ever told” (Ruhl 230). Like Passion plays that fuse the theatrical representation of the past narrative and contemporary reality, his rhetoric reaffirms the foundational American myth that Americans are the New Israelites of the Judeo-Christian narrative. The Founding Fathers’ quest for independence and religious freedom from the Great Britain in the seventeenth century is an inspirational narrative continuously recounted in many different settings including home, church, school and government (especially through the Thanksgiving holiday) that has given the citizens a profound sense of history and legitimized the New Nation’s political victory over its enemies. Like Reagan’s speech, ritual is a powerful

medium not only because it appeals to emotion but also because it creates a continuity between the past and the present that unites the participants with a shared group identity and conviction.

The performance immediately starts and P imagines interrupting the performance at the moment of J and Mary 1's embrace, representing an ideal Brechtian audience who critically sees beyond the world of the stage and burns with a strong desire to change what is being represented. P calls his ex-wife's name from the audience and time stops: (*To the audience*) "Ever get the feeling that you want to run onstage? You want to move, but you can't? It's this horrible feeling, as though you will run onstage and speak lines all garbled—lines you made up yourself?" (Ruhl 231). According to him, the convention of the fourth wall, or theatrical illusion, is the mask that hides the ugly truths of the war and politics that he witnessed on the battlefields: "This big stage this stage of history, this little block of wood separates you from your most terrible fantasies—it's important, this piece of wood, this stage, between you and it—" (Ruhl 232). Then P salutes to the president and brings out a gun, which makes a secret service agent leap for him. In the following scene, he appears with a limp hand to give the final monologue: "You might think, at the very end, that I'd kill my brother. Kill myself. Kill my ex-wife. Big love triangle, bang bang, an American Passion Play. But that's not how the story ends. I sat in my seat, and whispered: Mary, stop the play, and an old woman next to me said: shh. I left the theater that day" (Ruhl 234). Just as Brecht abandoned the realist theatre, so P left the theatre because he refused to remain a passive audience like the rest choosing to be manipulated by the theatricality of the performance. Unlike in the Passion plays, there is no representation of the Resurrection or the Ascension, and the play ends with P conducting the wind and sailing off on a boat under the white sky.

As we have seen so far, Ruhl employs Brechtian dramaturgy to challenge the theatrical illusion of Passion plays and alienate their performances for critical observation. Although Ruhl's play does not present much of the Passion narrative itself, her choice of Passion plays as a site of exploring the role of religion and theatricality in politics reaffirms their ritualistic power. From her point of view, the Passion of Christ becomes a metanarrative, a narrative with a legitimating function, when the power of the religious narrative based on its sacred symbols and emotional content is abused by political leaders. However, any theatrical representation of the Passion would not be the same for those who have seen Ruhl's passion play that associates Passion plays with the disturbing historical and fictional subtexts including adultery, Nazism and the Vietnam War. Owing to the critical distance set up by Ruhl's epic theatre, they will be able to see Passion plays with the "ritual awareness," being aware and wary of their possible political ramifications when the representations of the Passion is received as is. In this respect, the play is a postmodern theatre that nurtures incredulity towards metanarratives, and would work best when paired with a Passion play such as *The Promise* which does not seem to have much awareness of its potential for abuse.

Although the passion play has not yet turned out to be a commercially or critically successful theatrical piece, it would be misleading to evaluate the play solely by the conventional standards of theatre since its primary goal is not to entertain audiences or please critics. Rather, we could think of it as a ritual of a different kind or an anti-ritual. As a community project rather than a full-blown, spectacular and professional production, Ruhl hoped that the play would gather people in one room together "as we continue to meditate on the relationship of community to political icons" and "to meditate on what we can do to effect change in solemn times indeed"



(Ruhl xii). In other words, the play was meant to be a ritual by Schechner's definition in that it sought efficacy rather than entertainment, and that efficacy, rather than helping people build a personal relationship with Jesus as the Lord, is about detaching religion from politics and empowering the minority who have usually been excluded from the "Greatest Story Ever Told."

### **The Theatre of the Oppressed and Adrienne Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000***

Adrienne Kennedy's one-act play *Motherhood 2000* was first performed as a staged reading at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey, as part of the Winter's Tales festival under the direction of Michael Kahn in 1994. Here, the Obie-winning playwright continues to deal with the theme of the clash between the dominant white culture and African-American identity in the contemporary American society, as she dramatized in her canonical works including *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962), *The Owl Answers* (1963), *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1964), *A Rat's Mass* (1967), and the Alexander Plays<sup>31</sup>. Like Ruhl, Kennedy uses a Passion play as a site of investigating the relationship between theatricality, religion and politics but she challenges the ritual aspect of the Passion play with a postmodern dramaturgy more analogous to Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed than Brecht's epic theatre. Displacing the central figure and challenging the unity and fixity of the performance and the text, Mrs. Alexander's intervention

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<sup>31</sup> "The Alexander Plays" refer to a collection of Kennedy's self-referential works featuring Suzanne Alexander as the narrator/main character. The plays were published together under the title in 1992 and include *She Talks to Beethoven*, *The Ohio State Murders*, *The Film Club*, *The Dramatic Circle* and *Letter to My Students on My Sixty-First Birthday by Suzanne Alexander*. *Motherhood 2000*, though not included in the book since it was written after its publication, is another Alexander play in which Mrs. Alexander narrates the main action as the Writer.

into the Passion-play-within-the-play demonstrates how one can turn a metanarrative into a micro-narrative that empowers the minority. As we will see later, this postmodernist and Boalian reading of the play does not only shed light on the ritualistic and political dimensions of the Passion plays by way of contrast but also allows a more performative and aesthetic understanding of the piece than poetic and moralistic.

*Motherhood 2000* is set in a future New York which strongly evokes Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome" and the "smooth." Homeless people live on the sidewalks and in the hallways of apartment buildings and violent mobs have taken over the city shooting and bombing on the streets and constantly drowning city officials near the Statue of Liberty. In her essay "Remembering and Revenging the Death of Christ: Adrienne Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000* and the York Crucifixion," Leanne Groeneveld, comparing what she calls Kennedy's "revenge tragedy" with a traditional dramatic representation of the Passion, discusses how the protagonist's revenge in the former repeats the pattern of the latter revolving around the martyr and the "other" and fails to resolve her trauma concerning her black son. While her analysis of the play in comparison with the York play of the Crucifixion offers some interesting observations on the similarities between the two, it overlooks the pivotal departures from traditional Passion plays that Kennedy makes in her play. First of all, Groeneveld describes the orderless blueprint of New York in the play simply as "a state of apocalyptic turmoil" in moralistic terms paying little attention to its thematic significance to the play as whole (67). Rather, the absence of order and control in the city, in terms of postmodern aesthetics, represents that it has become a smooth space "occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces" (Deleuze and

Guattari 479). According to Deleuze and Guattari, the smooth, as nomad space, is “the continuous variation,” which the System constantly seeks to translate into “the striated,” the space of “horizontal melodic lines and vertical harmonic planes” (478). In other words, the striated is a space of order, unity and fixity whereas the smooth is one of disorder, heterogeneity and variability. The irony here is that New York was formerly the “striated” space *par excellence* as the representative city of modernism but has now become a bleak version of the postmodernist dream realized with the New Yorkers’ constant play with space (i.e. its “becomings”) in the absence of a central regulating system. And the heterogeneous demography of the brownstone apartment where Mrs. Alexander, the black woman referred to as the Writer, lives also represents the postmodern space: “In the brownstone I lived in it was impossible to tell friends from enemies: the five floors were occupied by Bosnians, Californians, Haitians, Neo-Nazis: all were split into subgroups and each group had their own agenda, wars, and language” (Kennedy 5). Characterized by the disconnection among the tenants and ethnic diversity, the brownstone is another example of the “smooth” space that frustrates the will to impose unity or to create meaning by giving priority to one sign over the other. As we will see below, the significance of the smooth-ness of the city and Mrs. Alexander’s abode lies in its contrast to the striated-ness of the all-white-male troupe called the Oliviers performing “an ancient miracle play” on the steps of the Soldiers and Sailors monument.

It is within this “smooth” space of infinite possibility where the Writer encounters this homogeneous male group of performers. As usual in Kennedy’s canon, the roof in *Motherhood 2000* serves as the place of “ghastly epiphanies” (Kolin 169). Hearing the actors perform nightly

from the roof of her apartment, Mrs. Alexander discovers that Richard Fox, the policeman who caught her son for not having his taillight on, handcuffed him and “kicked him again and again in the stomach” 9 years ago, is now playing the Savior (Kennedy 3). It was the innocent black young man who ended up being accused of physical violence against the cop, and the other ex-authority figures, “the former district attorney, the county manager, the police chief, and two policemen,” who were involved the case were playing Roman soldiers (Kennedy 4). The ironic casting, as Philip C. Kolin points out, shows “how Christian images and symbols have been perverted by a racist society” (22).<sup>32</sup> As in *Passion Play: A Cycle*, Kennedy destroys the illusion of character and defamiliarizes sacred symbols to demonstrate how they can be misused to legitimize oppression. However, Kennedy goes farther than raising critical questions to present a model of using a play as a site of praxis.

Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (hereafter referred as TO) is founded on the premise that every theatre is essentially political and that conventional theatre constructs an extremely powerful poetic-political system in which “the spectator assumes a passive attitude and delegates the power of action to the character” (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 34). Although Boal is indebted to Brecht for his recognition of theatre as a political apparatus, the former developed the latter’s ideas into more audience and action-oriented applications of theatre. Unlike the conventional Aristotelian theatre, Boal’s TO is committed to bringing agency back to the oppressed audience—who usually watches a finished product in the dark as Mrs. Alexander

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<sup>32</sup> His references here are “the bloody sacrificial altar in *The Owl Answers*, a cross for the crucifixion in *Motherhood 2000*, a nativity scene and the Eucharist in *A Lesson in Dead Language*, or the altar and aisle for the sacrilegious rituals in *A Rat’s Mass*.” (Kolin 22)

initially did from her roof—by eliminating the “Cop-in-the-Head,” the internalized submission of the oppressed to authority according to Boal, and helping them practice fighting oppressions through participation and improvisation. Especially in the Forum Theatre, the most widely practiced application of TO, anyone among the spectator can stop the action and change it in whatever way he or she personally finds most suitable in the absence of a director, turning the stage into a “smooth” space of constant variation. And the Writer’s New York, stripped bare of its Cops, seems to offer an ideal aesthetic space to do this type of theatre, which she showcases after joining the white troupe.

The Oliviers bases itself on the grand narrative of the American myth legitimized by power and tradition (i.e. the dominant white culture) and its root can be traced back to the New Israelites myth mentioned above. It is a “language game” that has its own rules, and its distinctive nature is twofold: it is traditional and institutional. And a ramification of this narrative is to dissociate African-Americans from the Gospel narrative and keep them failing to identify with a savior figure, which Kennedy dramatizes in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* where the black father/Father/God homology is made “impossible” by white culture (Kintz 160). Also, it feeds, and is fed by in return, the legal institution to which Mrs. Alexander keeps sending letters to no avail; rather, it seems to condone the racist brutality. And the white troupe’s performance itself contributes to the perpetuation of the socio-political narrative—according to which Jesus and legal authorities are supposed to be white while black people like the Writer’s son are charged with crimes that they did not commit, since narratives, themselves a part of the culture in question, “define what has the right to be said and done” in that culture and they are “legitimated

by the simple fact that they do what they do” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 23). In this respect, Kennedy’s *Motherhood 2000* provides an interesting counter-example to *The New Great Passion Play* mentioned in the first chapter. With the subtext of Kennedy’s alienating *petit récit*, the normativity of white Jesus and the predominance of white casts in Eureka Springs, even though unintended, cannot but appear “strange” and raise critical questions.

When Mrs. Alexander tells the troupe members that she once was a playwright and taught at Harvard, they, not remembering her name, admit her into their group letting her play one of the Roman soldiers as “their only Black member” (6). The significance of her granted membership in the Oliviers is that it changes the rules of the language game established by their racist narrative and sustained by the actors; her different skin color and gender challenges the racial and sexual homogeneity of the Olivier which is put in contrast to the heterogeneous demography of her brownstone apartment. And as a foreign element, she poses a threat to the “consensus” of the white members, which is required to “maintain and improve [the language game’s] performance” (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 60). What is interesting here is that they not only allow her to perform with them but also “rewrite a section of the play,” as if they were enacting a Forum Theatre whose technique is that “the spectators intervene directly in the dramatic action and act” (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 126). In this regard, she is a spectator-on-the-roof turned into a “spect-actor.” And her intervention, which the white actors would probably have expected to increase their competence in telling the narrative for her expertise in playwriting, ultimately leads to the delegitimation of the narrative.

When Mrs. Alexander confronts the white actors, she cannot take her eyes off Richard Fox; she realizes how she is still “agonized” by him (Kennedy 6). As the Soldiers deliver their lines written in early modern English, the monument starts to evoke Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion of Jesus. In a mundane sense, it is the scene of execution, a location designated for death, which accentuates the grim atmosphere of the city. One thing to be noted in the scene is that unlike the other actors playing Roman soldiers, the Writer is given only the following stage direction: “WRITER speaks with them” (Kennedy 7). In fact, this is a blank line, a void for the actor playing Mrs. Alexander to fill in; she alone is allowed the freedom to say whatever she chooses to, which empowers her as a subject. On the contrary, the Jesus of Richard Fox is given no line at all; he is bereaved of his voice, being silenced by the script merely as an “actor,” which is less favorable than to be a “spect-actor” in the Forum Theatre. The significance of this rewriting lies in its contrast to the scripted-ness of the Passion plays where it is almost unthinkable to change the Word. And Mrs. Alexander, unable to suppress her emotions, chooses to do the following.

WRITER. I spoke my lines coughing, wheezing . . . then found my place directly  
before Fox and struck him in the head with a hammer.

(SHE *does*.)

(HE *falls*.)

The moment she strikes him in the head with a hammer, he is relegated from the status of the Lord/Savior to that of a criminal, permanently losing his chance to rise again. Ironically, the

conclusion conjures the very image of death dictated by the line spoken by one of the soldiers at the beginning: "The foulest death of all shall he die for his deeds" (Kennedy 3).

Here, Groeneveld sees the play and the Writer's action merely as "static repetition," "a return to and a reenactment of" both her traumatic past and the York play (66-67), failing to notice the crucial differences between the "ancient miracle play" and the Writer's rewrite of the original. In her opinion, the Writer, formerly the victim, becomes the "Jewish 'Christ killer'" in the York cycle, the victimizer, by murdering Richard Fox only to repeat the dramatic pattern of "suffering and retribution and further suffering" (84-85). Ironically, her comparison of Kennedy's play with the York cycle itself seems to be "a return and a reenactment" of the traditional literary criticism in terms of morality and conventional dramatic structure, being blind to the new future the Writer creates in the aesthetic space of the play as an agent with her symbolic action. However, reading the play in light of the Boalian paradigm of aesthetic space instead illuminates the significant differences of Kennedy's postmodern miracle play from the medieval cycle. First of all, the Writer's punishment revamps the historical significance of the Soldiers and Sailors monument in an ironical way, since the monument commemorates the Union soldiers who died during a war fought to emancipate black Americans from oppression. The striking contrast of the two deaths the building now ensconces reveals that black Americans are no longer the disenfranchised slaves for whom many white Union soldiers had to die, but now play an active role in their cause. Kolin lucidly captures how Kennedy "rewrites" the narrative of the false Christ to empower herself in the following passage.



Kennedy rewrites sacred history and its fictionalization by the Oliviers to claim a mother's right of revenge. Suzanne has thereby become both solidier and executioner. In 2000, with the legal system crumbling, mothers are transformed from weeping women at the foot of the cross into militant Marys who give their sons the justice they have earned with their blood. (170)

Eventually, Mrs. Alexander's improvisation changes the sacred narrative into the performance of a mother's revenge, and this is how her "little narrative [*petit récit*]" changes the nature of the language game she seeks to delegitimize by all means (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 60). As a result, the passion play becomes a theatre *of* the oppressed, *by* the oppressed, *for* the oppressed.

And the space of the passion play, in Boalian terminology, became a "*metaxis*," the "middle ground," opened up to the Writer. It is a space of two different worlds, "the actual and the imagined, the tangible and the ephemeral" (Linds 114). And there, Mrs. Alexander does not simply repeat the cycle of oppression and victimization but changes both reality and the *image* of the reality. In *Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (2005), Boal delineates how the fictitious action of the "spect-actor" on stage can make such a difference in the real world.

*To liberate oneself is to transgress. To transgress is to be. To liberate oneself is to be.* By invading the stage, the spectator consciously practices a responsible act: the stage is a representation of the real, a fiction; she, however, the spectator, is not fictitious; she exists on stage and beyond the stage – *metaxis* – the spectator is a dual reality. Invading the stage, in the fiction of the theatre, she

practices and acts; not only in the fiction, but also in the social reality she belongs, simultaneously, to the two worlds, that of reality and that of the representation of this reality which is hers. Transforming the fiction, she transforms herself into herself. (74)

The stage of the passion play itself is a fiction. However, Mrs. Alexander, who is the spect-actor in the Forum, is not merely fictitious since she exists both as one of the Roman soldiers on stage and as a social individual whose body carries social meanings (e.g. familial, sexual, racial etc.) in reality; thus, she represents a dual reality. And with her intervention, she rewrites not only the narrative of the performance but also the grand narrative of American reality, which is rooted in the belief in the superiority of whites to black Americans, so as to challenge and discontinue it. As a result, both the passion play and the American society which contains the former become “smooth” spaces where reality is replaced with imaginative possibilities. In this respect, the passion play, with its religious message corrupted by racism, is a microcosm of the American society that nourishes false beliefs in its metanarratives, and the Writer’s action leaves a crack in the two worlds just as the New Yorkers razed the System. Therefore, the stage of the play, both fictional and real, is a space in between, *metaxis*, opened only to the spect-actor in the Forum who can change both stage action and reality with their tactics. Since those tactical transgressions bring back the people’s agency as subject, to transgress is to liberate oneself and, ultimately, *to be*. Consequently, the space the troupe inhabits becomes a space of liberty where “people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future instead of waiting for it” (Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* 5). It is not another “passion” play repeating the past but an aesthetic space which

resists catharsis, the rigidity of text and oppression to create a new future: the Theatre of the Oppressed.

In “Aesthetic spaces/imaginative geographies,” Shari Popen warns us that “we are at risk of becoming dispossessed of the ability to venture beyond proscribed limits of thinking and acting. The task then is to find openings, slippages, fissures, spaces that can provide footholds onto different ways of thinking and acting.” According to her, the smooth space like the Forum Theatre can enable one “to conjure alternative images and possibilities for those of us who are *in* the world but not *of* it in many ways” (125; italic original). Likewise, *Motherhood 2000* demonstrates how the oppressed can challenge the norm and claim agency not only in a theatrical setting but also in reality, especially when it comes to a ritualized performance like a Passion play in which the two worlds are deliberately fused. In the same vein, although an action like the Mother’s revenge seems to require serious reconsideration before being carried out during an actual performance, wouldn’t a little more notable presence of an African-American actor or more in the Eureka Springs play, for instance, have no effect at all on the contemporary reality?

Adam and Adrienne Kennedy’s *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, which won the 1996 Obie Award for Best Play, shows how she had been “agonized” by her son’s prosecution that made her “keep dreaming of suffocation” (20). Longing to hear from legal authorities for months, she kept writing letters with no immediate response or effect. It was while reflecting on this desperate waiting that she penned *Motherhood 2000*. Probably, she got tired of waiting and waiting for someone else to resolve the case; her faith in the law was fading. And probably, she might also

have come to reconsider her former dramaturgy by which she became a victim/narrator figure, who did little more than watching, talking and trying to “fit in American society” only to be terrorized by the “Other,” because she realized that it did not help improve her reality. For whatever reasons, she must have been feeling so disempowered, probably by her own passivity as Mrs. Alexander.

So this time, awakened by the Boalian recognition, “the play’s the thing,” she chose to use the oppressor’s theatre as a weapon. Consequently, the language game of the Theatre of the Oppressor, the white troupe’s passion play, became that of the Theatre of the Oppressed, the “smooth” space where she can participate in the action and improvise to empower herself. And she placed the scene where she would have thought most desirable to bring her solution into action. Completely stripped bare of authority, unity and fixity, the chaotic New York in *Motherhood 2000* offers the most congenial environment to her Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal stressed that, while the Theatre of the Oppressed is a rehearsal for revolution, that is not an end in itself. It is the real life that it aspires to change through the rehearsal. In this respect, Mrs. Alexander might have taken Boal too literally: she used theatre itself as her weapon without rehearsal or reflection, directly leaping on to “praxis” out of her emotion.

In his most recently published work, Boal divides human perception into three levels: “*Information – the receptive level,*” “*Knowledge and Tactical Decision-Making – the more active level,*” and “*Ethical Consciousness – the human level.*” The first level has to do with receiving information with senses, and the second level is about using the information and making decisions. On the third level, one gives “meaning and value to the decisions” (*The Aesthetics of*

*the Oppressed* 35-36). And among these three levels, Boal said that the third, “the human level,” should be the foundation of a Forum Theatre since it is most important to think about our choices and decisions that we make. Then, reflecting on the Writer’s choice, one might say, as Groeneveld pointed out, that her solution did not change anything at all and that it was too violent. In the Boalian paradigm, however, there is a crucial question we should ask before judging her: “do we have a better solution?” Even if we do, our task is not to say it sitting in the dark corner while watching others improvise their own solutions, but to show it on the stage of our lives as “spect-actors.” After all, *Motherhood 2000* is not merely a poetic drama in which the playwright narrates her return to her past and the Passion but a Theatre of the Oppressed that urges us to change our paradigm of theatre and carry it out with our own “performance.”

As mentioned earlier, this Boalian approach to the play does not only liberate the play from the limitations of conventional criticisms such as Groeneveld’s but enables us to conceive of the play in a more performative way. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the play has not had a full-blown professional production yet except for the staged reading at the McCarter Theatre in 1994, probably due to its brevity and narrative-like structure. Yet, focusing on the spatial tactics of the New Yorkers and the protagonist transforming the “striated” space into their own can help one visualize the play and make it more performable. Also, putting the play in the Forum Theatre format followed by a discussion can be another way to produce it.

As has been discussed so far, both *Passion Play: A Cycle* and *Motherhood 2000* are two postmodern anti-rituals that divest Passion plays of their sacred aura in Brechtian and Boalian

fashion respectively. If the primary strategies of ritualization involve differentiation, symbols employed in a traditional emotional narrative and fusion between the stage and the reality, the two passion plays un-differentiate the performances by revealing the context in which they can be politically abused, defamiliarizing symbols and destroying the illusion of character. This way, the plays function as anti-rituals that cause the audience to maintain critical distance in watching ritualized performances such as Passion plays. More significant is the fact that their challenge of metanarratives deriving from the Passion (e.g. Fascism and racism) results in the empowerment of the minority. Representing Jews, homosexuals, war veterans and African-Americans as victims of political persecution based on grand narratives that excluded them for being different, Ruhl and Kennedy draw a parallel between the Passion of Christ and the suffering of the modern-day human individuals making them the central figures of their postmodern christology. Translating the Passion into contemporary idioms, the plays show how the meaning of the Passion can be renewed and put it in new forms to suggest that the Passion and postmodernism are not mutually exclusive and that it is possible to turn Passion plays into a Theatre of the Oppressed depending on its usage.

## Chapter 5. Towards Micro-narratives:

### Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* and Stephen A. Guirgis' *Our Lady of 120th Street*

In this chapter, we will look at two more passion plays: Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* and Stephen Adly Guirgis' *Our Lady of 120th Street*. Similarly to the two plays discussed in the previous chapter, McNally and Guirgis shift focus from the suffering of Jesus to the tribulation of contemporary minority figures by replacing the Christ-centered master-narrative with individual micro-narratives. However, unlike Ruhl and Kennedy who put Passion plays within meta-theatrical frames for the critical observation of their relationship to politics from the outside, these playwrights transform the Passion narrative itself into contemporary narratives of downtrodden Christ-like individuals. While the analogy between Jesus' suffering and the passion of the political minority including Jews and African-Americans was not explicitly made in Ruhl's and Kennedy's plays, the two plays discussed in this chapter make a direct link between the Passion and the passion, though without the Christian theological subtext (i.e. Atonement and Redemption). They go farther than criticizing political ramifications of the Passion plays to appropriate the sacred narrative as the minority's own, and their effectiveness lies in the use of the symbols such as Jesus and the Apostles.

Through symbolism we recognize who are the powerful and who are the weak, and through the manipulation of symbols the powerful reinforce their authority. Yet, the weak, too, can try to put on new clothes and strip the clothes from the mighty. . . . Political reality is in good part created through symbolic means, as

many a candidate for political office has recognized. Creating a symbol or, more commonly, identifying oneself with a popular symbol can be a potent means of gaining and keeping power, for the hallmark of power is the construction of reality. (Kertzer 5)

The passion plays are postmodern rituals that empower the minority and demonstrate how the meaning of the Passion narrative and its symbols can be renewed and used to serve alternative political purposes through its transformation from the metanarrative to the micro-narrative in postmodernity.



### ***Corpus Christi* as Alternative Ritual**

*Corpus Christi* opened on October 13, 1998, at New York City Center, engendering a lot of controversy. About 2,000 people from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, identifying itself as the biggest Catholic civil rights group in the country, gathered outside City Center in opposition to what they thought of as “blasphemy,” while about 300 proponents of “freedom of expression” marched on the other side in a demonstration organized by the People for the American Way Foundation and several other free-speech groups. The Catholic League demonstrators remained outside the theatre even after the show began “despite the rain,” and the show went on as planned without any reports of violence or problem (Pogrebin). This was a climactic day in a long-fought battle that had begun several months prior when the play’s production schedule by the Manhattan Theatre Club was released to the press along with the reports that the play would feature a gay, Christ-like character who has sex with his apostles. The Catholic League had launched a campaign to stop the production and threats of violence including a phone message left by a man who would “exterminate every member of the theatre and burn the place to the ground” had initially made the Manhattan Theatre Club cancel the project for safety issues (Gerard). However, this decision immediately met with the ire of the artistic community, including award-winning playwrights such as Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein, Christopher Durang, Edward Albee and Athol Fugard who asked for the play to be reinstated, and was soon reversed. The play had its first preview performance on September 23 with “about 200 protesters who held a prayer vigil outside City Center on West 55th Street, between Seventh Avenue and Avenue of the Americas, and theatregoers were handed leaflets asking them to stand up and walk out of the play if they heard or saw anything abusive to ‘the

sacred values of your neighbors’” (MacFarquhar). William A. Donohue, president of the Catholic League, was quoted as saying that the play was “hate speech dressed up in artistic robes” leveled against Catholics (MacFarquhar), and many right-wing protesters including those in clerical positions saw the play as “historically inaccurate,” “offensive,” and “degrading.” In this section, I will show how the controversy surrounding the play demonstrates the symbolic power and malleability of Jesus as a religious icon and how the performance functions as an alternative ritual for sexual minorities challenging the normative image of Jesus. At the same time, rather than making judgments and stereotyping one side, I will try to suggest a middle ground for understanding both sides of the controversy, since it seems to have been more than a battle between artistic freedom and religious bigotry.

In the preface to the script, McNally makes a statement about what he set out to do with the controversial piece, arguing that “Jesus Christ belongs to all of us because He is all of us,” although unfortunately “not everyone believes that.” He continues: “Very few Christians are willing to consider that their Lord and Savior was a real man with real appetites, especially sexual ones. To imagine that He was not only sexually active but a homosexual as well is gross blasphemy. And they would deny others the right to conceive of Him as such” (v). It is clear that his intention is not claiming that Jesus was homosexual or that the play is a historically accurate, authentic representation of him and his life. Rather, he is challenging the two conservative Christian views that, first, holiness and sexuality are at odds with each other and, second, homosexuality is a grave sin.

It has already been discussed how different groups depending on their race, gender and culture conceive of and represent Jesus in their own different ways, even though none of them,

including the popular European image of Jesus prevalent in our culture, can be proven to be *the* image of Jesus. This is essentially due to the dual nature of Jesus, both divine and human, and while his divinity itself is unrepresentable by direct means, the humanity of Jesus has been expressed through features that are most familiar to the person representing him. Thus, we have a female Jesus, an African-American Jesus, an Asian Jesus and so on. Likewise, the gay “Christ-like” figure in *Corpus Christi* is simply one of the images of Jesus imagined from a particular group’s point of view, a group of which the most distinctive human character has to do with sexuality. And unlike race and gender that are immediately visible, their sexual identity can only be represented by sexual act. It is for this reason that the play presents kissing scenes between Joshua and Judas<sup>33</sup> and their off-stage sex. The goal is not to offend Christians with profanity. What also needs to be pointed out is that it does not attempt at being normative, suppressing the other images as the image of the white Jesus sometimes has but is simply one of the products of human imagination like any other. In this respect, *Corpus Christi* is an appeal to a more inclusive view of Jesus, asking for the “right to conceive of Him as such” from the sexual minority’s point of view.

The fact that the play does not claim authenticity can be seen in its bare raked stage setting with nothing but benches, a small pool of water and a perpetual fire<sup>34</sup> and the street

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<sup>33</sup> The homosexual relationship between Joshua and Judas itself is not McNally’s invention. The motif here seems to be the now well-known gay reading of the Gospel passages where Judas is described to approach Jesus to kiss him in order to indicate him to the mob who came to arrest him (Matthew 26.49; Mark 14.45; Luke 22.47).

<sup>34</sup> According to Sharon L. Green who wrote a performance review of the 1998 Manhattan Theatre Club production for *Theatre Journal*, the performance space “had been stripped bare to expose its backstage areas and lighting equipment” (194).

clothes that the thirteen actors wear, in contrast to the Passion plays that feature spectacular sets and costumes based on historical research. And similarly to Ruhl's play, McNally's passion play takes the Brechtian approach which breaks the fourth wall to encourage the critical thinking of the audience while watching the play. According to the stage direction, when the actors make their first entrance in street clothing, the house lights are still up and they "may either talk among themselves, greet people in the audience, or quietly prepare for the performance." At the sound of three knocks of a wooden staff, one of the actors comes forward and speaks directly to the audience:

We are going to tell you an old and familiar story. One you've all heard over and over, again and again. One you believe or one you don't. There's no suspense and fewer surprises. You all know how it turns out. But it's a story that bears repeating. Some say it can't be told enough. The playwright asks your indulgence, as do we, the actors. There are no tricks up our sleeves. No malice in our hearts. We're glad you're here. (McNally

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Like the opening speech above, the actors occasionally talk to the audience, especially when they deliver monologues, throughout the performance, and all of the actors except for Joshua play multiple roles at the expense of the coherence of character. As a result, the audience watch the play with the consciousness of its theatricality, being led to critically think about the contemporary situation the play presents in analogy with the Passion of Christ rather than to relive and be touched by the past events of the Passion relating them to their lives.

Although the play differs from the Passion plays in many ways including its goals and strategies, it is also meant to be “more than a play” like the latter. In the preface, McNally clearly states that *Corpus Christi* is “more a religious ritual than a play.”

A play teaches us a new insight into the human condition. A ritual is an action we perform over and over because we *have* to. Otherwise, we are in danger of forgetting the meaning of that ritual, in this case that we must love one another or die. Christ died for all of our sins because He loved each and every one of us. When we do not remember His great sacrifice, we condemn ourselves to repeating its terrible consequences. (vii; emphasis original).

Unlike the Passion plays whose main goal is to help the audience build a personal relationship with the Savior for salvation, McNally’s ritual, concerning itself with a more immediate and terrestrial agenda, needs to be performed to remind them to “love one another” in spite of differences so that “terrible consequences” will not happen again. Here, he makes a connection between the play and the murder of Matthew Shepard — the gay college student at the University of Wyoming who had been murdered by two men near Laramie, Wyoming, and died in hospital just one day before the opening of the show — as an example of the “terrible consequences” to assign some extraordinary meaning to the performance. Relating the two different events is one of the ways in which McNally ritualizes the performance by differentiating the play from other ordinary theatrical performances: “All *Corpus Christi* asks of you is to ‘look at what they did to Him. Look what they did to Him.’ At the same time it asks you to look at what they did to Joshua, it asks that we look at what they did one cold October

night to a young man in Wyoming as well. Jesus Christ died again when Matthew Shepard did” (vii). Although the play is not a normative, Jesus-centered ritual like the Passion plays, it still tries to ritualize itself by enwrapping the performance in some extraordinary atmosphere mourning for the young man’s death. In analogy with Jesus’ suffering and death, the suffering of Shepard and other homosexuals in the country are endowed with some sacred meaning.

And the passion ritual even appropriates two existing sacraments of the Church, baptism and marriage, without its authority. As the actors sing “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” a capella,<sup>35</sup> they change into the “uniform” of the play: “white short, khaki trousers and bare feet” (McNally 1). And then the actor playing John, playing both John the Baptist and the Apostle, blesses and baptizes each of the disciples pouring water from a pitcher on their bared heads (i.e. the method of baptism called affusion) before they introduce themselves. And what is significant here is that who is being baptized in the ceremony is not the character but the actor. For instance, John first baptizes the actor playing Andrew saying: “I bless you, (full name of the actor playing ANDREW). I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being. I adore you, (first name of the actor playing ANDREW). I christen you Andrew” (McNally 2). As discussed earlier, the passion play is about the people living in the “now” rather than the biblical figures in the distant past, and the audience are the participants/witnesses of the ritual recognizing the “divinity” of the each homosexual actor/character as a human being. Unlike the Christian ritual in which the notions of spirit and soul play an important role, however, the ritual of *Corpus Christi*, as implied in the play’s title meaning the “body of Christ,” only concerns

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<sup>35</sup> Gospel-themed songs including “Away in a manger,” “Ave Maria,” “Amazing Grace” and so on are frequently used throughout the play to augment the ritual atmosphere of the performance.

itself with the body and the secular world without resorting on the spiritual rhetoric of Christianity. This is also one of the notable differences between the Passion plays and the passion plays. Contrary to the former whose major goal is spiritual and lies in the future (Salvation), the latter are about the secular life and politics in the now.

Later in the play, James and Bartholomew come to Joshua as their disciples asking to get married and Joshua performs a simple union ceremony for them.

It is good when two men love as James and Bartholomew do and we recognize their union. No giggling back there! Now, take each other's hand. Love each other in sickness and health. Respect the divinity in your partner, Bartholomew. Cherish the little things in him, James, exalt in the great. May the first face you see each morning and the last at night always be his. I bless this marriage in Your name, Father. Amen. Now let's all get very, very drunk. (McNally 62)

As soon as Bartholomew praises Joshua with Peter's famous confession, "You are truly the Messiah, son of the living God," the High Priest, played by the actor playing Matthew, enters to denounce the union. And Joshua refutes him saying "You have perverted My father's words to make them serve your ends" and strikes the priest with a blow to the surprise of the others watching him. The performance of the sacraments within the play does not only challenge the authority of the Church that only entitles the clergy to conduct the ceremonies following its protocols but also makes the rituals their own. If the Writer in *Motherhood 2000* only intervened into the passion ritual of the Oliviers as a spect-actor to claim the performance of the "other" as

her own, *Corpus Christ* completely transforms the Passion ritual and the sacraments into rituals of their own in which they are the central figures who ordain themselves and constitute the body of their own church as well. And the ultimate purpose of the ritual performance is not to make fun of or parody the sacraments for satirical purposes but to publicly acknowledge and celebrate their humanity like any other person regardless of their sexuality.

Although the play follows the storyline of the Gospel narratives starting with the Nativity, the characters and settings are modernized, allowing the focus of the play to be on the contemporary plight of the sexual minority. After John baptizes each of the apostles, the actors provide background information on their occupations and interests. Andrew is a masseur who “didn’t say much when he worked”; James is a high school history teacher who loves “chalk and blackboards and erasers and maps you pull down of the Roman Empire” (McNally 2); Bartholomew is a doctor who believes that “[w]e have to heal men’s bodies before we can heal their souls”; Simon is a singer who “wanted to belong to something” all his life (McNally 3); Matthew is a brilliant lawyer; Thomas an actor, James the Less an architect, Thaddeus a hairdresser, Philip a hustler while Peter is still a fisherman. After baptizing Peter, John says to the two remaining actors, “One of you must be Him,” to which Joshua and Judas respond with the question “Is it I?” (McNally 6). This playful moment ironically reaffirms to the audience the fact that they are watching the actors baptized, not revisiting John’s baptism at the Jordan River recorded in the Gospels that one could witness at the Texas Amphitheater. John requests Joshua to accept his fate and baptizes the actor who comes forward christening him “Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, son of God, son of man.” As water is poured over Joshua’s head, the actor howls “as if scalded,” recognizing the significance of the baptism concerning his fate (McNally 7). And the



baptism scene ends with Joshua baptizing John and Judas, who shudders at the pouring of the water over his head, in the same manner. Judas gets razzes from others as he tells some unsolicited truths about himself including the size of his genital but goes on to criticize what he thinks is hypocrisy: “People can’t stand the truth. They want their Joshua, seen through their eyes, told through their lies” (McNally 9). Judas’ remark rings true in light of a plethora of different images that have existed in the culture, and reminds us that McNally’s version would be no more “false” than the others in that regard. Although most of the details about the disciples are non-biblical in the literal sense, they wittily translate those of the Passion into contemporary idiom since most of the disciples are said to have belonged to the lower class, most of them, if their occupations were known, being fishermen except for Matthew who was a tax collector for the Roman government despised by his own people (Matthew is a successful lawyer in McNally’s adaptation).

After the ceremony is over, the actors finally begin their preparation to present a passion play. They first bring a large basket filled with folded slips of paper with the names of the other roles they have to play written on them, including Joseph, Mary, a Roman centurion, the High Priest, the Motel Manager etc., and each of them, except for the actor playing Joshua, draws five or six slips. And then they display various props to the audience such as a hammer, thirty pieces of silver, a noose, the scourge, a crown of thorns, a stuffed dog of Nebuchadnezzar and so on. This is the same Brechtian strategy that we saw in Ruhl’s *Passion Play*, which presents characters as “actors” and stage objects as “props.” At the cue of John who is also the stage manager, the actors begin with the nativity, while those who do not participate in the scene “sit on the benches at the rear of the stage and watch,” “may occasionally comment on the scene”

and “supply appropriate sound effects” (McNally 12). With the presence of the other actors as watchers, the play keeps its theatricality exposed throughout the performance for the audience to refrain from too much emotional engagement and keep some critical distance. In this respect, *Corpus Christi* is a unique ritual which uses symbols such as the biblical figures and objects in an unconventional way, detaching them from their traditional referents and recreating their meaning in a new context through the performance process. We will see some specific examples of this de-familiarizing strategy below as we move along.

What is also interesting about the play as a ritual is that McNally uses a lot of humor and surprising twists to entertain and appeal to the contemporary audience, mixing dark comedy into what is essentially serious and tragic. Mary (the actor playing Peter) is shown to a vacant room in a motel by the Motel Manager (Bartholomew) while Joseph (Philip) is unloading the car, and she gives birth to Joshua and “takes a doll out from under her skirt” (McNally 12). As Joseph comes into the room to meet the new born baby, they hear the sound of a couple having a wild sex in the next room, and Room Service #1, #2 and #3 (i.e. the Three Magi) soon enter with their gifts for Joshua. After they leave, God (James the Less) tells Joshua about his future, whispering to him “All men are divine” (McNally 20), and the scene jumps to when Joshua is 13 years old.

Instead of impressing the rabbis and priests at the Temple in Jerusalem, Joshua is in modern day Corpus Christi, Texas, being chastised by a Roman Catholic priest who makes fun of him for being small for his age, not playing football and having no girlfriend. In this part of the story about Jesus’ childhood where little is told in the Gospels, McNally takes more liberty, filling the gap with a gay boy’s school life. During his time at Pontius Pilate High School, Joshua meets his English teacher Mrs. McElroy (James), who is the only one who understands him, and

Judas, who becomes his best friend and lover. At the prom night, Joshua is bullied by his schoolmates for being “queer” and Judas comes to his rescue, and when the two are left alone, Judas surprises Joshua with a kiss on the lips. Later that night, Judas interrupts Joshua and Patricia’s unsuccessful make out in a car, and the two men kiss again.<sup>36</sup> Instead of having them first meet as master and disciple as in the Gospel narratives, McNally gives some twist to the story to direct audience interest to the contemporary homosexual experience by transplanting the gay teenagers’ experience into the darkest part of the Gospel. This new insertion does not only inform the audience of the minority’s experience but also adds novelty to the familiar Passion narrative. After all, the goal of the passion play is not limited to efficacy alone, but it tries to educate and entertain the audience at the same time as a play.

In the following sequence of the Passion narrative, McNally continues to entangle the themes of identity and universal love with modern appeal and humor. John the stage manager narrates that Joshua suddenly disappeared one morning after the high school scene for many years and began his “public ministry.” He first miraculously cures the blindness and leprosy of the truck driver who gives him a ride, and the driver drops him in the middle of a burning desert saying “the world is waiting for You” (McNally 42). Then James Dean (Judas) appears as Satan to tell Joshua how he is going to die and tempt him to deny his identity as the son of God but Joshua resists him and embraces his destiny. After the Temptation, Joshua arrives in a city, meets Peter and some other disciples and starts to spread his gospel: “Love the Lord God your father by loving one another. That’s where He is, in each of us, not in temples or false idols”; “We’re each

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<sup>36</sup> In the original New York production directed by Joe Mantello, “after their kiss the lights faded out and when they came back up the two were leaning against each other in a tired familiar way, fully clothed, smoking cigarettes, implying the two had sex” (Green 195).

special. We're each ordinary. We're each divine" (McNally 50). According to Joshua's version of the good news, humanity equals divinity, since humans are created in God's image and homosexuals are as much created in His image as everyone else.

As in the Passion plays that presented Jesus' miracles to represent his divinity, Joshua performs the same miracles including opening the eyes of the truck driver, multiplying fish to feed people, driving the demon out of Andrew and so on as signs of his extraordinary nature. Joshua and his disciples have a Saturday night party, dancing to the disco music from "a bright and gaudy Wurlitzer juke box" (McNally 52). At the party, Joshua meets Judas who is now a successful businessman owning three restaurants but still a drug-addict, and Joshua softly advises him that he stop smoking poppers. Philip the hustler approaches and takes Joshua to his service room, where Joshua warms his heart by telling him "I love you" three times and cures his AIDS, a fatal disease once thought of as God's curse on homosexuals. Traveling like vagabonds but happy with the disciples who finally came together, Joshua continues his ministry and revives Lazarus, teaches the Lord's Prayer and marries James and Bartholomew. As the son of God, the homosexual young man is ordinary and special, human and divine, and his gospel reaches even to the gay community that has often been excluded from the ministry of the Church. In biblical terms, Joshua is a postmodern messiah whose humanity is represented with a homosexual body, and his difference is sublimated into "divinity" by the miracles he performs. And his good news is about the inclusive kingdom where the sexual minority also have a place and are cared for.

The character who opposes Joshua's pro-gay gospel is the Roman Catholic priest, a contemporary counterpart of the Jewish leaders from the Sanhedrin, according to McNally's

version of the “Greatest Story Ever Told.” Judas goes to the High Priest to betray Joshua for thirty pieces of silver but argues with him when he says Joshua’s crime is blasphemy.

HIGH PRIEST. Thirty pieces of silver. You boys make it very easy for us.

JUDAS. Thank you, father, we try.

HIGH PRIEST. But this one, He’s a dangerous man.

JUDAS. What is His crime?

HIGH PRIEST. Blasphemy.

JUDAS. Because He says He’s the son of God?

HIGH PRIEST. No, because He says you’re the son of God as well.

JUDAS. We’re all the son of God.

HIGH PRIEST. Unless you’re looking for trouble, I would keep that to myself. The son of God is a cocksucker? I don’t think so. We need sinners.

(McNally 65).

What is being challenged here is the conservative view that homosexuals are sinners fallen from the grace of God. According to McNallian theology, the gravest sin is not homosexuality but failure to accept and love one’s neighbors.

What follows is one of the “terrible consequences” of that sin; the “passion” of Joshua the homosexual. Joshua and his apostles return to his hometown, Corpus Christi, and are

welcomed by the townspeople waving palms and singing. That Passover night, he and the apostles have the Last Supper, of which “the stage picture should look like da Vinci’s” (McNally 67). This imitation of the familiar image to the audience is not only meant to achieve some “sense of ritual” but also to use homosexual bodies to create new meaning of that image. Joshua predicts that one of them will betray him and initiates the Holy Communion, although none of the disciples take the ceremony seriously; they imitate Joshua, start a bread fight and get drunk with wine. Joshua prays at the garden of Gethsemane while the disciples are asleep drunk, and Judas soon arrives with a mob. Taking the gay reading of the biblical passage farther, McNally has Joshua kiss back Judas hard when the latter kisses the former. And from this moment on, Judas reads the biblical verses describing the Passion as Joshua is mocked by the Roman soldiers, tried before Pilate who asks him “Art thou a queer then?” scourged and finally crucified as “the King of the Queers” at Golgotha (McNally 75). Joshua cries “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabbachthani!” (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) and dies on the cross. While the play generally eschews realistic emotional representation, the scourging and the crucifixion, although stylized, are handled with seriousness so that the audience “feel His passion” (McNally 76). As Brecht himself did not reject emotion itself in his epic theatre, the play takes advantage of the highly emotional part of the narrative to redirect the emotional response of the audience to its political context. Pointing at Joshua on the cross, the actor playing James the Less asks the audience to “[l]ook what they did to Him” and the actor playing Bartholomew reiterates the theme of universal love as the play ends: “He loved every one of us. That’s all He was about” (McNally 81).

The passion of Joshua encourages critical reflection on what is being done to homosexuals in this country by those who are intolerant of their sexual difference. While displaying similar postmodern aesthetic tactics to those of Ruhl's play, McNally goes farther than her to appropriate the Passion play itself as their (i.e. homosexuals) own ritual, in which the minority characters perform their own "unsanctioned" version of baptism, the Holy Communion and the crucifixion. As we have seen above, McNally finds the ultimate link between the Passion of Christ and the ostracism of homosexuality in the theme of suffering, a link rather hard to refute if translated in secular terms. Just as Jesus was vilified by and suffered at the hands of the Roman and Jewish authorities for parting company with their ways (i.e. breaking away from the norm), so homosexuals are now condemned for their difference. Like the other passion plays, *Corpus Christi* challenges the political status quo based on the grand narrative which has been corrupted by racist and sexist discourse.

Here it should be noted that what is more powerful than the theme of suffering is the triumph following it, the final sequence of the Passion narrative. Although the play does not include the resurrection, it is arguably implied since it is an indispensable part of the narrative. And, therefore, the play is not only a mourning ritual for the dead and the oppressed but also a ritual of celebration. First of all, the performance of the play as scheduled, despite many attempts to stop the performance including violent threats, is a victory of artistic freedom in itself. At the same time, it is also about religious freedom, an individual or a group's right to Jesus and his teachings. As McNally himself set out to do, the passion play featuring a gay Christ-like figure demonstrates that Jesus is not an exclusive property of mainstream religious groups but belongs to everyone.

Secondly, the mourning of oppression and recognizing the humanity of the sexual minority in the presence of audiences as participants of the ritual is an efficacious performance celebrating the acceptance of differences and universal love. The support of fellow artists, free speech groups and the audience for the play altogether has challenged the normative views on Jesus and human sexuality and demonstrated the value and power of human collectivity. With thousands of advocates on their side, McNally, the actors and homosexuals in the country proved that they were not “minority” but the same human beings who deserve the same respect and blessing a ritual can impart. As a result of the performance, gay-bashing in the country would be seen in a different light, overlapping with the image of the Passion of Christ as innocent victims of oppression. Ironically in this regard, the play can be seen as a very solid demonstration of the power of the Passion as a tool for resistance and empowerment of the minority.

Most of the oppositions to the play based on its historical inaccuracy and their assumptions about McNally’s intention, made mostly by people who did not even see the performance, are irrelevant or untenable. *Corpus Christi* does not claim to be an authentic representation of the life of Jesus, nor does it argue that he was homosexual or vice versa, that is, modern day homosexuals *are* Christ. Instead, what it tries to make us realize is that the humanity of the sexual minority in the country is as “divine” as that of anyone else, and therefore, Jesus’ humanity can be expressed with a homosexual body as it has been with many other straight human bodies. Labeling McNally’s appeal to respect for their humanity as “degrading” or “blasphemous” may reveal more about one’s own assumptions about Jesus and homosexuality



than one's love for the Christian deity, considering that what Jesus taught comes down to loving God the Father and loving one another.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, it would be reductive to say that the controversy surrounding the play was exclusively driven by different views on homosexuality. Earlier in the second chapter about *The Promise*, we have seen how seriously audiences react to representations of Jesus' life, and any minor departures from the Word such as the "Three Kings" can even make one yell. In this regard, it is not surprising at all that thousands of people found the play in which the Christ figure appears just as a vulnerable young gay man who has sex with Judas problematic. One can here imagine their number one hero, whom they worship and have a personal relationship with on a daily basis, represented in a way that they could not approve of, since Jesus is exactly that figure for the Christians. And from their perspective, it is not only about the sexuality of Jesus but also about the grand claim that an ordinary human being is as divine as the Son of God. Considering that the original meaning of the word "holy" (קדש; pronounced "kadosh") in Hebrew is "to be set apart" or "to be differentiated," the play's equation between humanity and divinity can be seen as "blasphemy." McNally's intention is not to claim the "divinity" of homosexuals in the same sense Jesus is believed to be divine by Christians. And yet, the heated debate happened essentially because the Passion plays, for most audiences, are not just plays. They are not just art. The biblical plays featuring Jesus as the central character are rituals that

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<sup>37</sup> Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22.34-40.)

represent the “reality” and have real consequences, and when the rituals do not resonate with their own beliefs and “sense of ritual,” the performance fails, leaving the audience ungratified, fearful and sometimes angry. McNally’s passion play is no exception; the “Christ-like” character becomes the “Christ” in its ritualized reception, since everything in a ritual is “real” and taken quite seriously. In this respect, the playwright might have gone a little too far with his own adaptation of the Greatest Story Ever Told, recreating it into an alternative political ritual that radically challenges its content, conventional interpretation and mode of performance. Thus, the controversy can also be seen as a clash of “sense of ritual” surrounding a play blurring the line between art and ritual. Depending on their focus on the passion (the suffering of homosexuals) and the Passion (that of Jesus), one can see it just as a piece of art or as a sacrilegious ritual, and the opposing groups seem to have taken the second approach to the play, which is ironically what McNally intended. As he clearly stated in the preface, the play was meant to be a ritual, and the stronger the resemblance between “Christ-like” Joshua and “Christ” appears to the audience, the more effective the ritual becomes.

As a play, *Corpus Christi* has not been McNally’s biggest success. Although it was named one of the best plays of 1998 by *Time* magazine, the play alone failed to be as engaging as the controversy and many critics questioned the play’s originality and artistic value. For instance, Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* was quoted as saying, “The excitement stops right after the metal detectors. . . . The play that brought an outraged chorus of protest even before it went into rehearsal is about as threatening, and stimulating, as a glass of chocolate milk” (qtd. in Rich). Sharon L. Green, in *Theatre Journal*, praised the performance of the thirteen actors and Joe Mantello’s “sometimes evocative direction,” impressed with the rare sight of “the ease,

compassion and tenderness with which male bodies interacted onstage” (195). However, she had more negative things to say about the “ultimately disappointing” play, including its failure to thrill the audience, “lack of originality and provocation” (196) — and very interestingly, the predominance of young white actors in the all-male cast.<sup>38</sup>

It seems that *Corpus Christi* served better as a ritual in terms of Schechner’s entertainment and efficacy briad. Although it failed to garner critical acclaim or thrill the audience, the controversy about the play has demonstrated its significance as a site of difficult dialogues and challenging the normative view of sexuality. Aside from its artistic weaknesses, Green saw the performance worth doing for more important reasons: “there is also something powerful and moving in McNally’s intention to reclaim this ‘old and familiar’ story and the sheer presence of these bodies onstage trying to make it their own. In the context of recent debates over decency in artwork, the importance of this staging of *Corpus Christi* extends beyond the play’s literary significance” (196). After all, McNally seems to have succeeded in getting his point across; love one another no matter what differences or “terrible consequences” will follow, including oppression and violence followed by the birth of a new “christ.”

It seems that the controversy surrounding *Corpus Christ* will continue for the time being, both in and outside the country. The 2000 London premiere of the play made the Shariah court of the U.K. issue a fatwa against the playwright. A college production at Indiana University–Purdue University, Fort Wayne, IN, was mounted after protests and lawsuits in 2001, and a student’s attempt at presenting some scenes from the play as part of a directing class project at Tarleton

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<sup>38</sup> She noted in a little concerned tone that the actors “were all young bodies and, with the exception of James Leung, who played James the Less, all appeared to be white” (195).

State University in Stephenville, TX, was aborted in 2010. In my opinion, stereotyping the protesters simply as bigots and homophobes can be as dangerous as denouncing the play as blasphemy and hate speech. The controversy, as I suggested above, does not appear to be just about freedom of expression since *Corpus Christi* is meant to be more than theatre. It is a ritualized performance in which the theatrical representation *is* the reality and the “Christ-like” character becomes “Christ.” Thus, the controversy has also to do with the radical nature of the passion ritual in which an ordinary young man appears as a postmodern reincarnation of the Christian deity.

However, putting the question of making judgments on the play and taking sides aside, *Corpus Christi* is a significant contribution to the current debate on faith and homosexuality which urges us to re-evaluate what we have believed to be normative or “sinful.” As we saw in the examples of the Passion plays, any representation is selective and reflects a point of view, and *Corpus Christi* is not much different from the former in that respect. The violent reactions to the play and homosexuals in the country have demonstrated that the act of denouncing what one believes to be “sinful” may be more sinful in terms of consequences. It seems to me that what can be muddled by the question of whether the play should be allowed to be produced or not, or whether the taxes of the people who disapprove the play should fund it, is McNally’s message: “Look. Remember. Weep, if you will, but learn. And don’t let it happen again” (vii). What would be much more effective than picketing and making lawsuits against the passion play is to pray and act for a future in which there is no more “passion” due to oppression because of differences in our everyday lives. Hopefully, McNally’s play is one step we have made toward that future.

### **The Passion Schizophrenia in *Our Lady of 121st Street***

Stephen Adly Guirgis' *Our Lady of 120th Street* (hereafter referred as *Our Lady*) had its world premier at Center Stage in New York by the LAByrinth Theatre Company on September 16, 2002, and was one of the best reviewed plays of the season. It ran off-Broadway for five months and was named one of the ten *Best Plays* in 2003. Although it was not a commercially profitable run, Robert Hofler of *Variety* recalls that its sixteen-week engagement at the Union Square Theatre was "one of the longest in recent memory for a new play presented in an Off-Broadway theater" (43), and the play has since been produced by several major theatre companies including the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, LA Theatre Works (starring Laurence Fishburne) and at the Almeida Theatre in London where it earned a Laurence Olivier Nomination for London's Best New Play.

Like *Corpus Christi*, the play rewrites the Passion narrative in contemporary idiom to dramatize the plight of disenfranchised individuals that have not received much attention on American stage. However, the play significantly differs from the former which uses the Passion narrative for a particular group and for particular political purposes. *Our Lady* is concerned with less overtly political and more diverse issues. With a highly pluralistic composition of the apostles in the absence of the Christ figure, it is the most "postmodern" passion play discussed in the second part, a "schizophrenic" version of the Passion that nomadically wanders from the center, without concern for stable meaning and totality. The analysis using Lyotardian and Deleuzian terms will not only demonstrate how Guirgis' postmodern dramaturgy fulfills the major political agenda of theatre and religion today but also help explain the critical attention the play received in spite of the absence of a strong central character and a cohesive linear plot. As

we will see below, the critical success of the play displaying significant departures from the dramatic structure of the modern theatre represented by Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Sam Shepard and so on shows that "postmodern drama" is possible.

*Our Lady*, like the Passion plays and *Corpus Christi*, is modeled on the four Gospel narratives in the New Testament of the Bible, although the connection might not be so obvious at the first encounter with the play. To begin with, in the exposition is the "passion" of Sister Rose, the "rabbi" figure, caused by her abusive father who used to beat his wife and daughter when drunk; to "atone" for his sins, she worked hard for social outcasts such as drug and alcohol addicts until she died; soon after her death, her body disappeared from the "tomb"; the Twelve (i.e. the number of all the characters in the play), most of whom were her former students and loved the "saint," come back to their Harlem Catholic school only to find her coffin empty; there comes the police report that her body has been stolen, a parody of the Jewish priests' bribing of the Roman soldiers.<sup>39</sup>

What is more significant than the play's similarities to the original version for the current discussion, however, are the former's departures from the latter. First of all, if we consider the life of Jesus ranging from the Nativity to the Ascension as represented in Passion plays such as *The Promise*, Guirgis leaves out the beginning and the end in his version of the Passion,

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<sup>39</sup> According to the Gospel of Matthew, this is what happened after Jesus' Resurrection:

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (28.11-15)

presenting a flat narrative that has no crisis or climax: there is no presentation of the Birth, the Crucifixion or the Resurrection. Secondly, in contrast to the “tree” structure of the master-disciples relationship central to the Gospel narratives and the Passion plays, the character composition of *Our Lady* constitutes a “rhizome,” a non-hierarchical, horizontal organic entity with the One subtracted (n-1). Not only is the One feminized and absent in the world of the play (i.e. the nun’s stolen body) but also the multiplicities that the characters represent in terms of race/gender/sexuality—remembering that Jesus and his disciples were all Jewish males and they are all portrayed by white actors in the Passion plays analyzed in the first part—are striking: Victor is an Italian-American male in early fifties, Balthazar a Latino male detective in mid-thirties, “Rooftop” an African-American male in mid-thirties, Father Lux a white priest in mid-seventies, “Flip” and Gail an African-American and white gay couple both at the age of thirty-seven, Inez an African-American female in late thirties, Norca a Latino female in late thirties, Edwin and Pinky Latino brothers in late thirties, Marcia and Sonia white women in mid-thirties and early thirties respectively. Regardless of the different gender, age or other social categories they occupy, the characters do not form any hierarchical structure at all as the graduates of the Harlem Catholic school, which is their only common denominator. What is more, after the death of Sister Rose (who does not rise from the dead as Jesus does in Passion plays), there is no moral guide or system that could judge them or impose mission, order and meaning on their lives. In contrast to the Passion plays in which the teachings and suffering of Jesus as the Messiah remain the central focus, the passion play is more interested in the “apostles” that draw a horizontal line

in front of the empty casket, evoking the postmodern resistance to the unity and hierarchy of the System.<sup>40</sup>

Not only the diversity of the “apostles” but also the secularization of the Daughter (i.e. not the “Son” of Man) changes and divests the grand narrative of its halo. The play opens with Balthazar and Vic having a dialogue in the main viewing room of Ortiz Funeral Home. The exposition reveals that they both were formerly taught by Sister Rose and that she, who is remembered as a “living saint on this earth” by her students, was not killed by crucifixion for the salvation of all mankind but died from alcohol overdose while running drug and alcohol overdose prevention programs “to atone for the sins” of her alcoholic Irish father (Guirgis 5-6). The all-too-human quality of the sister and the dysfunctional father-daughter relationship are a far cry from the immaculate holiness of Jesus and the loving Father-Son bond recorded in the Gospels.<sup>41</sup> More interestingly, what has been stolen is not only her body but also Vic’s pants,

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<sup>40</sup> In fact, the rhizomorphous model of the play can be thought of as a stage adaptation of the structure of the LABrynth Theater Company itself, which was founded by thirteen actors in 1992 as the Latino Actors Base (LAB) providing an informal space in New York City for fledgling actors to rehearse and perform. Guirgis, as the son of an Egyptian father and an Irish-American mother, was one of the founding members and started his professional career in theatre as an actor. Now as a “multicultural collective” with over 100 members “from a wide array of cultural perspectives,” the company has produced 50 new American plays “self-generated” by the members collaborating in the process of acting, directing and playwriting (“About LAB”). Although they admit that everything was difficult without an organizing center at the start, the weakness soon became their strength with the strong teamwork of the members to put the LABrynth on the national map. In *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, Philip Auslander points out that, while it is hard to define “postmodern theatre,” pluralism and collective creation are the two of the most significant postmodern phenomena (102-14). In this respect, the LABrynth Theater Company is one of the major cradles of postmodern creativity, of which *Our Lady* is a notable outcome.

<sup>41</sup> “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love;



both of which are to be found later. In the postmodern mystery play, the value of a saint's body is equated with that of trousers, which are to remain earth-bound without any implication of transcendence.

Equally disorienting is the fact that, instead of following the footsteps of Jesus with a central theme, *Our Lady* presents the individual narratives of each character's past, which, strictly speaking, do not revolve around the Christ figure and are unrelated fragments. First, Walter "Rooftop" Desmond tries a playful confessional with Father Lux relating to his past sins: "lying', cheatin', stealin', and humpin', . . . Freebasing" with little show of repentance (Guirgis 16). Robert "Flip" returns to his childhood hometown Harlem from Wisconsin with his white male partner Gail and is seen arguing with the latter by the bathroom. "Flip" is asking Gail to be silent on their same-sex relationship since he is afraid of coming out to his old schoolmates, the postmodern equivalent to Peter's denial of Jesus in the Passion narrative. In the middle of the conversation, "Flip" encounters Inez Smith, his former colleague in the Catholic school, and learns that she and Rooftop have been divorced fifteen years due to his infidelity. Edwin and his brother Pinky Velasquez, accidentally disabled by the stone Edwin threw when young, have a row with the dead nun's niece Marcia about their smoking in the waiting room and then move on to share their personal problems. And next comes Inez's story of her escapade with a Haitian cab driver when she was fifteen and Norca's reminiscence of her ex-boyfriend who was a robbery suspect. The other characters' "sins" revealed in the exchange of the colorful vignettes of their past and present run parallel to Rooftop's to cancel each other out, leaving only a series of anti-

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with you I am well pleased"" (Mark 1.9-11). The same event is also recorded in Matthew 3.16-17 and Luke 3.21-22.

heroic self-exposures. These narratives in fragmented forms may appear irrelevant to the Passion narrative but they wittily translate the human frailty of the Apostles and the notion of Jesus as a “Friend of sinners”<sup>42</sup> in contemporary terms. The micro-narratives also display structural differences from the modern theatre as well as the core Passion narrative without the moral center as well as the conventional dramatic arc of crisis and resolution to be left as “plateaus,” another Deleuzian term meaning “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end” (Deleuze and Guattari 22).

The “plateau” is not only the topographic model of the play as a whole but also the recurring pattern in each dialogue. Most scenes start with two characters having a conversation, which is interrupted by a third person before the dialogue reaches a conclusion. For instance, Rooftop’s confessional with Father Lux is stopped by Balthazar knocking on the door; “Flip” and Gail’s quarrel by the restroom is put on hold by Inez’s entrance which opens another dialogue. Hence the function of the third character in each scene is not to mediate or advance the conversation so that it will find a resolution but to defer it so that the narrative will remain in the

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<sup>42</sup> The following passage from the Gospel of Mark is one of the popular examples that gave Jesus the epithet:

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (2.13-17)

middle ground. The play maintains its anti-structure of rhizome by allowing its narratives to move only horizontally, but not vertically. While the plateau model, in which there is little plot development but rather inconsequential verbal exchanges, may not be an exclusive feature of the postmodern drama, its particularity lies in the play's contrast with the Passion plays where the story moves toward Calvary through the conflict between Jesus and the "others" including the Sanhedrin and Satan as the dramatic counterpart. In Guirgis' passion plateaus, there is no hierarchy, political oppression or crucifixion due to the sectarian division between "we" and "they." The characters are all "us," the "sinners."

In contrast to *Corpus Christi* where the Judeo-Christian notion of "sin" is almost absent and all characters are recognized as ordinary and divine, *Our Lady* reveals all of the characters as "sinners," each of them no better than the others. Even the priest is no exception. In Scene Two, Rooftop continues to switch his session with Father Lux back and forth between "conversational" and "confessional," which is continuously interrupted by the former's nagging digressions, rough language and marijuana smoking. Although apparently nothing significant happens in the scene thematically or dramatically, Rooftop's "conversational" is pivotal in locating the play in the postmodern discourse of narrative since his interruptions seem to mirror the postmodern resistance to authority and to coherent, meaningful narrative. Father Lux's playful term "conversational," in contrast to "confessional" which implies the vertical trilateral relationship among God-priest-sinner, ironically evokes the image of a horizontal dialogue between two equals, a distinction similar to Lyotard's own contrast between "conversation" and "institution" as two different types of language game.

In the ordinary use of discourse – for example, in a discussion between two friends – the interlocutors use any available ammunition, changing games from one utterance to the next: questions, requests, assertions, and narratives are launched pell-mell into battle. The war is not without rules, but the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance. From this point of view, an institution differs from a conversation in that it always requires supplementary constraints for statements to be declared admissible within its bounds. (Lyotard 17)

In Lyotard's terms, Rooftop's casual remarks constantly challenge the rules of the confessional only to decrease the performativity of its language game. The de-centering postmodern "conversational" is less interested in reaching a consensus or the absolution of sins than producing fragmentary narratives to refute authority, deconstruct hierarchy and resist meaning (in the teleological sense). It is, interestingly, the absence of the traditional values that makes true "conversation" possible in the play. The second encounter between Rooftop and Father Lux happens in a bar, as Father Lux enters in the middle of the conversation between the former and Balthazar to continue the confessional. They hesitantly say the Lord's Prayer following the priest, but the sense of spirituality is soon betrayed by the priest's confession; this time out of the church building, it is the priest who does the confession and the laymen listen.

FATHER LUX. I'm not a good priest. I don't visit the sick because I'm afraid to go outside in my vestments. They don't let me say Mass anymore. I haven't left the rectory next door since I was transferred here nine months ago. And I don't want to. Black people scare me. I don't particularly like them. Or you, really.

Most of the time, I don't believe in God at all, and when I do, I'm furious at Him . . . That's as honest as I can be. (Guirgis 75)

The significance of the self-exposure is not so much its shock value but the effect it has on Rooftop, since it is only after this revelation that Rooftop truly opens up to him; i.e. when Father Lux turns out to be Judas, the betrayer of Jesus (or Lucifer as his name foreshadowed) who fell from grace like Rooftop did. The scene replays the previous “conversational” in the truer sense — the language game in which a horizontal dialogue between two equal beings takes place. And in the conversational in the bar, it does not really matter how long it takes whereas it did in the prior confessional in the church according to the rules of the language game.

FATHER LUX. Tell me everything you've ever done in your entire life that you feel killed your soul.

ROOFTOP. But that'll take days!

FATHER LUX. I don't have a problem with that. Do you? (Guirgis 76)

The changed dynamic between the two lapsed Catholics shows that it is not so much the presence of the authority and holiness of the church but their absence that makes conversational possible, which leads to the language game of “rhizome.”

The liquidation of the metanarrative through absence and revision goes on in another little narrative of the two brothers, Edwin and Pinky. Marcia and Gail are sitting alone at different tables in the bar as Edwin storms in, upset with his brother he sent on an errand sixteen hours ago. Pinky then enters with “a smushed Yodel” and tells how Norca took advantage of him

with his disability check, which ironically gave him the “best time” of his life. (By this point, it is obvious that they bear little resemblance with the two fishermen brothers, Peter and Andrew, who immediately followed Jesus upon being called.) Edwin explodes with anger and throws hurtful remarks at Pinky, but these remarks hurt himself. It is watching the struggle between the brothers that opens Marcia to share her own narrative; her grandfather’s abuse that turned Sister Rose and her mother into alcoholics, the cause of their deaths. Then Edwin recounts how Sister Rose, despite her sometimes strict disciplines, helped her brother and him.

Hold up. Yes, she could be wild, mean sometimes, she had a big stick and she knew how to use it, believe me, but ask any kid who grew up ‘round a hundred twenty-first, and if they’re being honest? They’ll tell ya something special she done for them . . . ‘cuz thass who she was . . . and thass why so many people are turnin’ up outta the woodwork, ‘cuz in their heart?—they know . . . They know she was . . . that she was . . . Our Lady, ya know? (Guirgis 83-84)

Here, attention should be paid to the nun’s title “*Our* Lady” and the local reference “‘round a hundred twenty-first” since they display how she was an axis of a local narrative, not the One in the grand narrative; i.e. she is not the God of all nations, but was only a school teacher in Harlem. In this sense, Sister Rose is an incarnation of Lyotard and Guattari’s postmodern gods, an example of “the supervention of a micropolitics which will attend to the local and the specific without recourse to some grand programme or macropolitical theory” (Docherty 4). Certainly, her domain does not go beyond the area around the 121st street and her Enlightenment project seems to have failed even with her own disciples.

In the meantime, Edwin and Marcia's little narrative, like the others, is interrupted by Gail; his question if he looks gay or not. As Gail withdraws, the conversation between Edwin and Marcia is resumed. Marcia is drawn to Edwin out of sympathy and asks him out. And yet Edwin has to reject her due to the "cross" of Pinky he has to bear, for which Marcia compares him to a "martyr." In this postmodern passion play, a martyr is not so much the witness of heavenly Christ who dies for their testimony but those, like Edwin, who sacrifice their lives for their neighbor groundlings. Another point to note in the scene is that Edwin's loyalty to his brother is put in contrast to "Flip"'s denial (for his namesake?) of his partnership with Gail for the fear that his former colleagues should learn of his homosexuality. All of these little narratives of the characters intertwine in the course of the play without forming a single "grand" narrative.

Nevertheless, all of the differences relate in an interesting way; they are connected not so much by similarities as absence: the absence of center, direction and hope. As a result, the grand meaning of "Passion" is reduced to that of "passion," the suffering of modern individuals in the secular sense. This deconstruction, or the "postmodern condition," of the Passion results in the alienation of the sign, or the death of the referent, especially of Christian symbolism. In the fallen world of the play, the saint's body suffers the same destiny as a pair of pants, and the sacredness of religious signs have been lost and superseded by the commercial sign system that gives priority to common material goods:

FATHER LUX. My name is FATHER LUX.

ROOFTOP. Yeah, so what?

FATHER LUX. I'm sorry.

(Beat)

ROOFTOP. Lux, huh? You mean, like—

FATHER LUX. Like the soap, yes.

ROOFTOP. I was gonna say Lux as in the Latin, meaning “light.”

FATHER LUX. That’s impressive. Most people say the soap. (Guirgis 58)

The above dialogue indicates how much control capitalism holds over the meaning of signs in postmodernity — where things are mainly treated as commodities — in lieu of modern political and religious apparatuses such as the government, school and church. And the symbolic power of the parable of the prodigal son on which Rooftop resorts to appeal to the priest is even challenged by the priest himself: “Do you think you’re more important than those others who may be waiting?” (Guirgis 67). In such ways, Christian symbols are defamiliarized and diluted; the signifier continues its existence but is emptied of its traditional fixed referent.

Since, as Jean Baudrillard argued, the referent no longer exists in the postmodern culture, it seems that it is now the signifier that is at stake. The opening scene of the second act, through the mouth of Balthazar, reveals that Sister Rose’s photo too is gone with her body.<sup>43</sup> The stealth of her sign (photo) along with the referent (body) completely obliterates her presence, and the absence of her image seems to strike Rooftop as the bigger blow than that of the body in the postmodern world where simulation not only has replaced the real as “realer” than the reality but

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<sup>43</sup> In the theological sense, this would be a postmodern equivalent to the Protestant iconoclasm that opposes “simulacrum.”



also constitutes the social order. Rooftop hopes that a photo or even a mass card could replace her body to resume the funeral process but the idea does not seem to sound very appealing to others and the room will be closed until the nun's body is found. It appears that the thief, no matter what their motivation was, understood the heightened status of simulacra in the postmodern culture; i.e. take the image away, and nothing remains. As a result, there is no commemorating her eternal presence by reproducing her image. And as a matter of fact, the photo is never returned, while the body, the referent, is later reported to have been found in an incomplete, mutilated form.

The notion of simulacra, or the non-existence of the real in postmodernity, can be related to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome since both result from the absence of the One, the central System which determines the meaning of signs, and in both, the relationship between signs is de-hierarchicalized and made horizontal. Thus, both rhizome and simulacrum speak to absence (n-1), an idea recurring throughout the play and is also noticeable in the two authority figures of the play: Father Lux and Balthazar. We have already seen how the Catholic priest became an empty sign, and the name of Balthazar, one of the Three Magi according to the Western tradition, suffers the same fate. Whereas the biblical narrative mentions him as one of the first worshippers of the newborn Child lying in the manger, what Guirgis' Balthazar first witnesses is the absence of the nun's body instead. The Nativity motif surrounding him reappears towards the end of the play when he recalls his son in his infancy, also with some irony. As a cop, Balthazar's institutional authority is alienated in a similar way when he tries to stop the confessional to interrogate Rooftop in the earlier scene. The tension is soon lifted and, ironically, it is Balthazar, the cop, who has to plead guilty for intimidating his old friend "holding a bag of weed and a

eight-ball of blow” (Guirgis 60). And then Rooftop terminates the confessional at his will and goes to join Balthazar at the bar, leaving Father Lux crying out to him. As part of the sign system, the notion of authority, along with religious symbols, has lost its meaning in the fallen world; little of the political power which oppressed the Jews and crucified Jesus in the time of the Passion is to be found in it.

The play reaches its final “plateau” as the characters abandon each other towards the end; Edwin sent Pinky away out of anger and frustration, Marcia seems to have given up on Edwin and left, Gail is breaking up with “Flip,” Rooftop and Inez revisit their past only to widen the chasm, and Sonia too is leaving as Balthazar enters with Vic’s pants and the news that a couple of patrolmen found only half of the nun’s body contained in a suitcase by the riverside. In the context of every bond divided and separate, even the corpse is not an exception. The half body seems to represent the postmodern resistance to transcendence in two ways. First, the fact that her body has been found frustrates the hope for resurrection and ascension; it is less desirable than to remain unfound in this respect. Secondly, the desecrated body could not be a relic of presence for her followers, since the presence of the half would constantly remind them of the absence of the other half, which was lost somewhere in the river. Even the mechanical reproduction of her complete image is thwarted since the photo is lost.

The final secret to be disclosed is the fact that the father “with the ham sandwiches” whose young son had been raped and murdered, introduced at the beginning of the play, is Balthazar himself. In conjunction with the absence of a central character and a conventional dramatic structure, this is another postmodern departure from the modern theatre, as well as the Passion plays, where the revelation of a father-child bond is often crucial to the conclusion of the

play as in Ibsen's *Ghost*. Balthazar's final recollection of the son in his infancy evokes the image of the Nativity and the Holy Spirit in an ambiguous way: "He was trying, you know, my boy was trying to catch the wind, Vic . . . I always remembered that" (Guirgis 104). Does the wind symbolize the Spirit or the futility of the soul? It is hard to tell. What is certain, however, is that the memory "hurts a lot" (Guirgis 105). While Balthazar's young son seems to be another imitation of Christ in the play with his innocent death, the play refuses to assign any grand meaning to his suffering and cruel death. And the play, with most people gone, closes with an overwhelming sense of absence with nothing resolved. What fills the atmosphere is nothing but the painful memory of what has passed, the passion of the modern day individuals.

As examined thus far, *Our Lady*, like *Corpus Christi*, modifies and diminishes the Passion narrative into a different "language game" (or several language games) with a focus on more immediate concerns, "here" and "now," and both of the passion plays re-imagine the Passion in a way that has seldom been considered normative in order to give voice to the minority. In contrast to McNally's play, however, Guirgis' anti-structural play even reshapes the original structure of the grand narrative by displacing the Christ figure, pluralizing the apostles and replacing the narrative of conflict (i.e. between Jesus and the priests) with de-centered, anti-heroic and fragmented narratives. In this respect, the passion play adapted by the postmodern discourse with a pluralistic cast and no centering or other-ing challenges us to reconstruct our memory of the Passion in more inclusive terms in the New Millennium.

As discussed in the first part, performing the Passion of Christ in its original context in today's political climate will leave us many challenges not simply because of the issues concerning historical accuracy but also because representation is not innocent but always loaded.

This is probably most evident in the context of religious performance which takes the human body as its essential medium and imparts transcendental meaning to the “ritualized body.” It is for this reason that Passion plays’ predominance of white casts and stereotypical representation of the Jewish authorities could be problematic, and very interestingly, even McNally’s passion play was not completely free from those issues. In this respect, Guirgis’ play seems to provide a useful model to think how we can re-member the Passion of Christ in contemporary American idiom reflecting multiple points of view and making it an appealing theatrical experience for contemporary audiences at the same time.

If the play succeeded as a play, how did the play appeal as a ritual, or is it a ritual at all? It seems that *Our Lady* is not only least identifiable as a passion play but also the least ritualistic play dealt with in the second part, the main reason being that the play does not use any symbols from the Passion narrative. Although Sister Rose and the twelve characters can be conceived of as the Christ and Apostles figures, the Lady never appears on stage to be mocked and crucified and the micro-narratives of the twelve, rather than the story of the Lady, constitute the body of the play to distract the audience from the Passion. Therefore, in terms of Geertz’ definition of ritual as a symbolic construction of reality, it is hard to see the play as a ritual when it does not have the miracles, baptism at the Jordan River, crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ figure. Secondly but as significantly, the play makes little effort to differentiate the play from other theatrical events in terms of performance venue and time (not cyclical like the Passion plays), performance style and its meaning. Even in Schechnerian terms, the play seems to lean towards entertainment rather than efficacy. Overall, *Our Lady* has little to be considered to be a ritual of the Passion, and this probably explains why the play did not get complaints about the historical

inaccuracy of the show and stir up a controversy as *Corpus Christi* did despite its wild departures from the Passion narrative.

This, of course, does not mean that there is no way the play can be thought of as a ritual or the play is just entertainment not having any effect. First of all, when seen against the Passion plays, Guirgis' play reveals what are lacking from them in light of contemporary American culture and politics, and therefore, can serve as a complementary counter-ritual to the former. Secondly, the play is a public mourning of the passion, the suffering of modern individuals who have lost their ways. It is a ritual in that sense but is a different ritual than the Passion plays since it does not use the sacred symbols or build a ritual environment where the schemes of differences create a center, hierarchy and division. Rather, it is a postmodern ritual of rhizome (n-1) where differences stay on equal terms without opposing one another. More plainly speaking, the audience are invited to accept differences and share their passion without making judgments or being judged. As mentioned above, this postmodern reading of the play offers a sophisticated explanation as to why the play, despite its departures from the conventional dramatic structure, appealed to diverse audiences with different cultural and religious backgrounds.

What both *Corpus Christi* and *Our Lady* demonstrate is, first, that the metanarrative of the Passion does not die but continues its existence in postmodernity, albeit in differently adapted forms. Although postmodernity may reflect "incredulity towards metanarratives" as Lyotard saw it, it does not mean a total rejection of them. Rather, they still remain viable, transformed by contemporary discourses into various small narratives where the passion receives more attention than the Passion. Through the process, the Passion narrative becomes less schematized and more inclusive. Again, this is far from abandoning the Passion since the passion

would lose its profound meaning without reference to the former. That is, McNally's *Corpus Christi* would not be as provoking and powerful as it was had it not been for the Passion and its profound implication for instance. In this light, postmodern theatre is a process through which metanarratives are not just re-evaluated, criticized and challenged but also updated, extended and recreated to reflect multiple points of view. Therefore, it would be more accurate to say that postmodernity does not mean the end of metanarratives but their transition into diverse small narratives.

Secondly, the discussion of theatre and ritual revolving around the Passion/passion plays reveals that none of the performances are exclusively one or the other. Looking at Passion plays just as theatre does not explain their continuity and power to change lives despite their artistic shortcomings by conventional theatrical standards, just as applying only theatrical terms to *Corpus Christi* makes it difficult to articulate why the performance matters and why it caused such a controversy. In the same way, approaching the plays just as rituals would make us lose sight of their entertainment value and artistic creativity. Therefore, it is necessary that Passion/passion plays be examined in broader, multiple, interdisciplinary terms rather than singular (i.e. theatre) for one to fully comprehend their political, religious and socio-cultural value and impact, since they are more than just plays.

## Conclusion: A Difficult Dialogue

When police officer Tom O'Connor lifted the body of Salmi Morse, the playwright and producer of the first professional Passion play in America, from the icy water of the Hudson River, these were all that was found in the dead man's pockets: "42 cents, some counterfeit Hebrew shekels, a signet ring and some personal papers." Not far from the site was his "black silk hat (containing a tract entitled 'God Loves You'), found lying on the railroad track at 93rd Street," from which the 57-year-old man might have jumped or been pushed. This was the end of the man who "had been for a brief time the most despised human being in America" and whose "trials had been splashily recounted in the pages of every city newspaper" and "covered by journals all across the United States" (Nielson 4). The only known "crime" he had committed was to try to produce a Passion play in which a human actor impersonated Jesus.

The drama surrounding the fates of his play and Morse himself was a result of a complex blend of various factors, two of them being the deeply held anti-theatrical prejudice and the religious objection to the representation of the holy. In light of the numerous representations of Jesus and the Passion that have engulfed the American culture and sometimes ignited religious and cultural wars since then, those who fiercely protested the Passion play may have been right to see that something like the Flood was coming. Once opened, the gate would never shut. Although there are still heated debates surrounding plays such as *Corpus Christi*, we have come a long way, and there is no way of knowing when the Deluge stops. As the first person to open the gate by introducing a three-dimensional Jesus in the country, would Morse's legacy be as

meager as what he left in his pockets? Sad to say, again, there is no telling how much impact he had on artistic freedom, next generations of Passion/passion plays and theatre in the United States. And such is the nature of theatre. Despite its liveness and physicality, the existence of a theatrical performance is ephemeral and its efficacy is invisible.

However, the question of efficacy becomes a little different when we view the play as a ritual. The “ritual” understanding of the performance does not only allow us to look at it from a different angle but also equips us with more vocabulary to evaluate its efficacy. On the conceptual level, for example, just performing a ritual itself can be efficacious for ritual presupposes the presence of the “holy,” something that is more powerful than what is visible, and is a channel to communicate with the Being who is believed to have control over the reality. In human terms, the collective presence of the participants in the same space enhances the group solidarity and shows to others that something extraordinary is happening, leaving “mundane” concerns such as the ticket sales and artistic quality unimportant and even irrelevant. In this respect, one might say that Morse was a “ritual pioneer” as the first American to conduct a Christian ritual in the form of a Passion play. In fact, when he noticed that one of the major objections to his play in New York had to do with the site of performance, a secular theatre, he tried to “ritualize” the play by remodeling an old building which had first been a church into a performance venue called “The Shrine of the Holy Passion” — he sometimes even called it a “church,” devoted solely to the presentation of the Passion play. Just as an ordinary Christian goes to church to achieve more than just a churchgoing, that is, to communicate with God, build and strengthen the community and make changes in the real world with their worship and prayer, he seems to have tried to do the same in his own way. Morse’s play could have been as



efficacious in that sense, but the time was not ripe for his contemporaries to accept the “radical” format of ritual he tried to import from Europe. Maybe it was because they feared that it would turn out to be more powerful than a traditional Christian ritual?

Now in the year of 2012, one hundred and thirty three years after his play, the new ritual seems to have found wide acceptance and even become very popular among some public, making the Puritan suspicion of theatre a tale of yore. Both ritual and theatre, the Passion/passion plays, though sometimes neglected, have shaped the landscape of American religion, culture and politics since *The Passion* of 1879. Heated debates, demonstrations, legal battles, and enthusiastic public receptions surrounding them have demonstrated the power of representation, live performance and the Passion. As the stage did not perish since the advent of the multimedia including video, film and the Internet, the suffering of Jesus still seems to have a powerful presence in the cultural memory of the public in the age of skepticism and multiculturalism. This continuity of theatre and the Passion in the New Millennium opens the door to a positive way of understanding postmodernism rather than negative. Not so much a challenge, abandonment or rejection of what has passed down to us, postmodernism could mean continuing the heritage just in new ways, devised to keep up with the changing circumstances. The significance of this positive view is that it neutralizes the popular image of postmodernism being leftist and progressive and enables us to draw a model in which the conservative and the progressive work together for a better future in postmodernity. Reducing the “Truth” to “truths,” different groups can speak the same language, though with different accents and nuances, for communication and mutual understanding instead of provoking and expressing anger.

If that language should be theatre, there is one thing required of both the speaker and the addressee prior to communication: ritual awareness. As we have seen so far, a theatrical performance such as a Passion/passion play can be a powerful and (for that reason) dangerous medium, due mainly to its ritual potential. As McKenzie contended, we can better understand the value, effect and risks of a performance only when we take into account the discourses of theatre and ritual. However, McKenzie's point is not simply to assert the foundational status of the fields of theatre and ritual in performance studies but to discuss a bigger challenge involved in interdisciplinary approaches to performance. Pointing out how the "persistent use" of the concept of liminality in the field of performance studies has made it normative, a phenomenon he calls "liminal-norm," he argues for the necessity of "metamodelisation" in building conceptual models.

[T]he liminal-norm also suggests that any given conceptual model, even one constructed and deployed to theorize transgression or resistance, is necessarily limited in terms of both its formal and functional resistance, is necessarily limited in terms of both its formal and functional aspects. . . . The challenge, then is . . . to fold generalization back on itself in order to avoid reducing performance to any one model. . . . The task is thus also to multiply the models at one's disposal while at the same time opening up these models to their "own" alterity. To cite yet another model: Félix Guattari describes schizoanalysis as a process of "metamodelisation," one that, "rather complex, will work toward its complexification, its processual enrichment, toward the consistency of its virtual lines of bifurcation and differentiation, in short towards its ontological heterogeneity." (52).

Simply put, what McKenzie suggests is not merely to avoid “reducing” performance to one conceptual model but to add different models available *ad infinitum* to complement the limitations of each model and even invent new ones. While this dissertation tries to incorporate concepts from a few different disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, gender and queer studies, theatre and ritual, there must be more models that can be used and will shed light on the plays’ dimensions yet to be discovered and make the bilateral communication more informed and effective. This will be one of the major challenges that any further analysis of American Passion plays will have to face.

What this suggests is that a performance is an event that resists easy labeling, and any putatively innocent theatrical performance has the potential to become a ritual or something else depending on its context and reception. Although my analysis has its own limitations in terms of the number of the conceptual models that I have used, the interdisciplinary understanding of the Passion/passion plays provides a way of articulating the efficacy of performance and a theoretical base for us to think about the role of theatre in contemporary religion and politics. Even though the effect of a performance is usually invisible and thus immeasurable, the investigation of the Passion/passion plays seems to advocate the efficacy of performance. If there is no effect at all, why would the Passions plays go on with the volunteers’ time and money wasted? Why would the Anti-Defamation League have so vehemently opposed the Passion plays and why would the Catholic League have worked so hard to stop *Corpus Christi*? If performance, then, is not just entertainment but has real impact on society as theatre practitioners and scholars have long believed, it reminds us of a crucial point regarding performance and theatre in general: ritual awareness. It seems to me that the issues of the Passion plays dealt with in the first part are

not totally irrelevant to other types of theatre, ranging from the most commercially-oriented theatre to the non-profit, community-based or even educational theatre. For instance, aren't there still the remnants of the normative practice to cast white actors as the main characters representing authority and beauty in many productions? I am afraid that I, if I asked them, would get in return excuses quite similar to what we have seen in the first part, including historical accuracy based on the text and their small pool of available diverse actors. Also, don't we content ourselves with a tendency to stereotype the "others" who have different views and beliefs as objects of satire and even derision, a very common practice in today's political theatre? Can we just say it is OK without any qualm for the glib excuse that "we" are in the minority and "they" deserve it so that "we" can celebrate our own victory in our own ritual excluding the "others"? Then it would be perpetrating the presumption of reiterating the old Christian rhetoric of the Passion in which "we" are the innocent sufferers for our good cause because "they," in the wrong, persecute "us." In the current political climate where few seem to be willing to cross the chasm between the "right" and the "left," what we really need is more respect for each other and more reflexivity on our own "performance," since what it all comes down to is living together on the same planet. And considering disagreements will always rise among us, the best way to be on the same boat is to try to find the common ground, "love one another" in Passion terms, avoiding making fun of and attacking others. When we stop insisting on our own points of view and accusing others for differences with drastic measures, we pave the way for real dialogues. I sincerely hope that my own dialogue between the Passion plays and the passion plays that I attempted here in the dissertation will make some contribution towards that ideal.

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